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WILLIAM WESTALL,

Author of

"RED RYVINGTON," "THE PHANTOM CITY," "TWO PINCHES OF
SNUFF," etc.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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HER TWO MILLIONS.

CHAPTER I.

A BASELESS SLANDER.

WHEN it became known that Corfe was a married man, and that his wife had joined him, the staff of the *Helvetic News*, both upstairs and down, as well as the English colony generally, were a good deal surprised, and not a little excited. For several days nothing else was talked about, and the rumours concerning the cause of their separation and his reticence on the subject, were many and sundry. Corfe treated the matter very cavalierly. When the head book-keeper told him that an English lady had been at the office asking for his address, he said he was quite aware of the fact, that the lady in question was his wife, and that it was only owing to the delay of a letter that he had not met her at the station.

“She would have joined me sooner,” he added, “only we could not afford to keep house, and she has been nursing an old aunt from whom we had expectations. The other day the old lady died and

left Mrs. Corfe a little legacy, which will help to keep the pot boiling, so she came to me at once, and I am deuced glad to have her. You have no idea how fond of each other we are."

He gave no other explanation, and when anybody suggested an inquiry as to why he had kept the fact of his being married so close a secret, he would either give a laughing reply, which meant nothing, or hint that his domestic affairs concerned only himself—according to the humour he was in.

A few days after his wife's arrival, Corfe gave another supper, and to it were invited, besides Balmaine and several other of his men friends, Mrs. Gibson, Mrs. Mayo, and the head book-keeper's wife, Madame Bland, a little French brunette. All these ladies had their doubts as to the propriety of complying with the invitation, but all ended by accepting it, for like everybody else they were dying with curiosity to inspect Mrs. Corfe. The supper, supplied by a neighbouring confectioner, was quite *comme il faut*, and Mrs. Corfe came out of the ordeal with flying colours. The men admired her, and the women could not deny that she was a lady. She played and sang so well, moreover, that nobody ventured to follow her except Corfe, who sang both to his wife's accompaniment and that of his guitar. All remarked how fond they seemed of each other, and how greatly Corfe had improved. He seemed quite gay and

showed none of his old moroseness of manner. The ladies were charmed with him, and on the very next day, the Corfes received an invitation to supper from Mrs. Gibson, and to afternoon tea from Mrs. Mayo.

But the invitations were hardly despatched when there came to the ears of these ladies a tale that wrung their souls with anguish and made them bitterly rue that they had ever taken the Corfes up. It was rumoured that they were not really husband and wife, and that Mrs. Corfe, or whatever might be her name, was no better than she should be.

"I wonder how he dared!" exclaimed Mrs. Gibson. "It was a piece of gross impudence to ask us to go at all, and to think, to think—why, it's positively insulting. You will surely resent it, Edward! The least you can do is to discharge him at once."

She was a large woman with a red face, high cheek bones, a Roman nose, lofty eyebrows, and severe lips, the very picture of outraged propriety; and she quivered with indignation to her very cap strings.

"What on earth is the matter?" asked Gibson, looking up in wonder from his *Journal de Lacustrie*.

"Matter! everything is the matter. Those people—I can hardly bring myself to name them—those people are not married."

"What particular people have you in your mind, my dear? I believe a great many of our fellow-creatures are in that unhappy condition."

"You know quite well, the Corfes."

"Who says so?"

"Who says so! why, everybody says so. Mrs. Hodgkinson told Mrs. Carver, and Mrs. Carver told Mrs. Hart, and Mrs. Hart told Mrs. Mayo, and Mrs. Mayo has just told me. What would you have more? And they actually went to the chaplain's afternoon reception yesterday!"

"What all of them?"

"Why will you purposely misunderstand me, Edward? You know quite well what I mean. Corfe and—and that woman had actually the audacity to present themselves at Mrs. Hart's reception yesterday. If it had not been for you I should never have gone near them, and I shall regret having done so to my dying day. I'll take very good care not to be taken in that way again, I can tell you. Poor Mrs. Mayo is in a dreadful state. I left her just now quite in tears; she is so sensitive, poor thing, and feels the disgrace keenly."

"What rubbish! how can she be disgraced? But tell me, first of all, how you know the Corfes are not married?"

"Have I not told you? Everybody says so."

"But how does everybody know; who told them, Corfe or his wife?"

"I should think not indeed! Do you suppose that Mrs. Hodgkinson, or Mrs. Carver, or Mrs. Hart would speak to either of them?"

"How do they know, then, that Corfe and this lady are not married?"

"Lady, indeed! don't call her lady to me if you please, Edward. Do you suppose for one moment that Mrs. Hodgkinson and Mrs. Carver and Mrs. Hart would say what they did not know, and go about telling untruths?"

And Mrs. Gibson threw back her head with an air of triumph, as if she had delivered a very telling stroke indeed.

But Gibson came up smiling.

"I do not think they would go about telling untruths if they knew it," he said, "but there is such a thing as being deceived. Do you know whether Mrs. Hodgkinson has seen Madame Coquetage lately?"

Madame Coquetage was an Englishwoman, the widow of a Swiss gentleman, and she had spent the greater part of her life in Geneva.

"Yes, I believe she was there on Tuesday. But what has that to do with it?"

"A great deal. Madame Coquetage is the wickedest old woman in Geneva."

"Madame Coquetage a wicked old woman. What will you say next, Edward? It is really dreadful, the way you go on. Why, she is of

the highest respectability; her maternal grandmother was a nobleman's daughter; she goes to church twice every Sunday, and gave a hundred francs towards the new organ. Nobody could behave with greater propriety. You may say what you like, I call her a nice, good old lady."

"Good people don't slander their neighbours."

"I wish you would not be so obscure. What do you mean, Edward?"

"I mean that Madame Coquetage has a passion for saying people are not married. Perhaps she was never properly married herself. And she does it in such a way that nobody can tackle her for it. 'Very nice people, I dare say,' she will say of new comers; 'but I wonder if they are really married.' And then she will go on to tell how, some years ago, a couple came to Geneva with good credentials and were well received and asked everywhere, until it was accidentally discovered that they were not only not married, but that she had been a defendant and he a co-respondent in a divorce suit."

"Good heavens!" interrupted Mrs. Gibson, with a look of horror, "suppose—suppose the Corfes are in that position? Nobody knows much about him, and she—she looks capable of anything."

"Nonsense! She is one of the nicest women I ever met, and, unless I am greatly mistaken, as good as gold."

"And you actually dare say to me, Edward

Gibson, that a hussy who is mixed up in a divorce suit is as good as gold—which means, I suppose, that she is a good deal better than I am. I never presumed to be as good as gold. Thank you, Edward,” and Mrs. Gibson, rising from her chair, smiled scornfully and made a majestic courtesy.

“Don’t make a f——, don’t be absurd, Penelope,” returned Gibson sharply. “I did not say that Mrs. Corfe was defendant in a divorce suit; but that Madame Coquetage tells a story of somebody who was, and that she never loses an opportunity of suggesting that all the English and Americans who come here are pretty much in the same case.”

“So you think; but will you permit me to observe that I doubt the accuracy of your information? I know better. Madame Coquetage is not a woman of that sort.”

“You think not,” said Gibson quietly, yet with a humourous twinkle in his eye that boded mischief. “But what would you say if I told you that Madame Coquetage said, some time ago, that we were not married.”

“Edward, it is not true. I—I—don’t believe it.”

“I can prove it though. She said it to Mrs. Leyland; Leyland told me, and if I had not taken prompt measures the story would have run all over the town. I wrote her a letter which rather astonished her I fancy, for until she began to talk

about the Corfes she does not seem to have slandered anybody for a month or two."

"The wretched, wicked, bad, lying old hypocrite," cried Mrs. Gibson passionately. "She deserves putting in prison. I'll go to her and tell her what I think of her, the false, deceitful old slanderer. You must send for our marriage certificate, Edward. I will show it to everybody in Geneva."

"Better not, I think, Penelope, *qui s'excuse s'accuse*, you know. I stopped Madame Coquetage's tongue in time or it might really have been necessary to do something of the sort. She made it so hot for the Wainwrights once—Wainwright was the chaplain before Hart came—that they had actually to leave their marriage certificate on view at the English pharmacy for a whole week. And all because Mrs. Wainwright had not returned Madame Coquetage's call quite as soon as she should have done."

"What a horrible woman!"

"Rather. I shall give Corfe a hint of what is going on. If he does not shut her up it may be very unpleasant for his wife. People seem more prone to believe evil of each other here than they do even at home—probably because they are so ignorant of each other's antecedents—and it must be confessed that some very queer folks do occasionally take up their quarters in the place. That's what makes some of the Swiss so shy of associating

with us. They have entertained black sheep un-
awares."

"And you really think these Corfes are not in that category, Edward—black sheep, I mean—and that I may continue to recognise them?"

"I am sure you may. Mrs. Corfe is a charming woman."

"Charming women are not necessarily virtuous," interposed Mrs. Gibson sharply.

"Nor are virtuous women necessarily charming," thought Gibson, but he judiciously kept the sentiment to himself.

"You seem to admire Mrs. Corfe very much, Edward?"

"Oh dear no, at least not particularly. I thought she had a pleasant expressive face and nice manners, that is all," was the rather evasive answer.

"Well, I cannot say that I admire your taste. If it were not for her hair, and her eyes and her mouth and her complexion she would be quite plain, while as for her manners she is a great deal too forward and Frenchy for my liking."

Mrs. Gibson was quite right in thinking that her husband admired Mrs. Corfe. He admired her very much; and it was his admiration for her, quite as much as any kindly feeling for Corfe, that caused him to communicate to the latter the rumour he had heard from his wife.

Corfe was quite equal to the occasion. He thanked

Gibson for his kindness and even showed him the marriage certificate that Esther had brought with her.

"I shall show it to nobody else," he said. "I don't care for this old woman; but I thought I should like to let you see that your confidence is not misplaced—and if you hear anything you will know what to say."

"And I shall say it, you may be sure of that, Corfe. But I should certainly advise you to shut up Madame Coquetage. If you don't, your wife may be exposed to some unpleasantness."

"If you think so, Mr. Gibson, I will certainly make an effort to her shut up. I should not like my wife to hear anything of this abominable slander. Women are so sensitive about these things."

"More sensitive than sensible sometimes," returned the editor, laughing at his own joke. "Will you write to Madame Coquetage?"

"No; I shall see her."

And see her he did, though not without difficulty, for Madame Coquetage by no means wanted to see him. He did not say many words, yet they answered their purpose so effectually that the old gossip took care not to mention his name again in any connection until—but I must not anticipate.

Altogether Corfe came well out of the affair. He made a friend of Gibson, and silenced his detractors at the same time. He did his best also to secure

the friendship of Balmaine and Delane, was always particularly gracious to them, inviting them often to his house "to smoke a cigar and drink a friendly cup of tea"; Esther did the rest. She was always bright, and—Mrs. Gibson to the contrary notwithstanding—her manner was thoroughly ladylike; she could moreover converse intelligently about politics and some other things concerning which most women know little and care less. Corfe seemed proud of her; and her love of him, without being obtrusive, was palpable, and pleasant to see.

"What I like about Mrs. Corfe," said Balmaine one night, as he and Delane walked home together from the Corfes' lodgings, "what I like about her is her unaffectedness."

"Yes," put in the sub-editor warmly. "The very first word she speaks she makes you feel at home. Why, I have only seen her twice, and I could almost fancy that I had known her for years. Did you hear her ask about my mother and my sisters? And how well she sang that Irish song! I know now why Corfe used to be so gloomy and short-tempered sometimes."

"You think it was because of domestic trouble?"

"I do. It's no business of mine, perhaps, but I would give twenty francs this minute to know why they were separated."

"Yes," said Alfred pensively, "it is rather a strange

case, and the way in which Corfe explains his wife's sudden appearance is——”

“Made up. Of course it is; but I don't know that you can blame him much for that. He cannot be expected to take all the world into his confidence in a matter of that sort. Some unfortunate misunderstanding probably.”

“Or jealousy?”

“I never thought of that. Yes, I should think Corfe could be jealous if he tried. But I always said he was a good fellow at the bottom, and this proves it. I once heard my father say that a good husband cannot be a bad man, and I believe it's true. And nobody could be more devoted to a woman than Corfe is to his wife. You remember my saying that he seemed like a fellow who had missed his tip?”

“Yes, I think I do remember you saying something of the sort.”

“Well, I was not far wrong,” said Delane, laughing, “for if he did not miss his tip he missed his wife, and that is pretty much the same thing I take it.”

CHAPTER II.

MURDER AS A FINE ART.

MRS. CORFE had asked the two young fellows to call without ceremony whenever they felt disposed, assuring them that they would be quite welcome, and saying, with a pleasant smile, that as they seemed fond of music she should always be glad to play for them. There was policy in this as well as kindness, for Esther wanted Corfe to stand well with the *Helvetic News* people; she had an idea, suggested by himself, that in the event of the editorship becoming vacant he would have a good chance of obtaining the situation. Corfe, who was especially gracious, cordially seconded the invitation, pressing Balmaine to come on an early day and have a game at chess with him. So one evening, about a week later, Alfred looked in at the Corfes' lodgings a second time. The little *domestique à tout faire* who opened the door told him that Madame was out, but that if he would step into the salon, Monsieur, who was in his own room, would join him in a few minutes.

There were some books on the salon table. One was a rather elaborate work on toxicology—Corfe,

as Alfred knew, had some knowledge of chemistry—but not finding the subject very interesting Balmaine put the book down and took up one entitled “Our Mountains,” in which were related many moving incidents and wild adventures among the peaks, passes, and glaciers of Alpine regions. He was deep in a story about a man who, while crossing a glacier, slipped down a crevasse into a subglacial stream, and, after sustaining severe injuries and undergoing terrible hardships, crawled down the icy torrent, and nearly frightened his wife to death (who thought him dead) by appearing before her with pale and blood-stained face, and clothing all in tatters, when Corfe entered the room.

“Hallo!” he said—as it seemed to Alfred rather more abruptly than he need have done—“what have you got hold of? I see, ‘Our Mountains.’ There are some good things in it, and some awful crams. That tale about the guide who fell down a crevasse and turned up after many days cannot be true. If he had escaped being killed on his way to the bottom he would certainly have been drowned in the water or frozen stiff by the ice.”

As Corfe spoke he took up, with seeming carelessness, the book on toxicology, and put it, upside down, in the highest shelf of a little swing case that hung on the wall. Then he expressed his regret that Mrs. Corfe was out; she had gone to take supper with Mrs. Gibson, and he had engaged

to fetch her home. On this Balmaine made as if he would take his departure, but Corfe pressed him to stay, saying that as it was a "hen party" to which his wife had gone he had no wish to present himself at the Gibsons' pension before ten o'clock, and when it was time to go they might walk up the street together. So cigarettes were lighted, and Corfe produced a chess-board. As a rule he played a very good game, but on this occasion he seemed to be thinking about something else, and Alfred check-mated him easily, twice running.

"It is hardly worth while beginning another game," Corfe said somewhat testily. "I shall have to start in less than half an hour." And then he enquired if there was any further news about a sensational poisoning case which was being tried in London. He had not seen an English paper for two days.

Alfred told him the latest news, from which it appeared that the case was going very much against the prisoner, and that he would almost certainly be found guilty of the crime laid to his charge.

"Serve him right for being such a bungler," said Corfe. "He deserves to be hanged, if only for his stupidity."

"That's one way of looking at it certainly," answered Balmaine; "but don't you think that there is a Nemesis which always waits on murder—

that the mere contemplation of crime upsets the balance of a man's judgment, and converts him into a bungler? How else can you account for nearly every murder that is committed being sooner or later detected?"

"A great many are not detected, *mon ami*. When the police are successful they make a big noise; when they fail they preserve a judicious silence. But if the truth were known I daresay they reckon as many failures as successes. Even in this little place two or three murders are committed every year to which no clue is found; and nobody knows how many people are secretly poisoned or otherwise made away with without anybody being the wiser."

"Do you really think there are many cases of secret poisoning?" asked Alfred.

"I have not a doubt of it, especially on the Continent, for I fancy that in England the inquest acts in some measure as a check; and Continental doctors—at any rate French ones—are much more afraid of responsibility than English doctors. They must have something like proof positive before they open their mouths. Look at the affair of Marie Jeaneret, which occurred here only a few years since. She poisoned a dozen people, and nearly all with a very common drug—the effects of which are well known and easily recognised—before any doctor dared to denounce her."

“Twelve persons?”

“Yes, twelve, and seven of them died. She was a sick nurse, and poisoned her patients because she took a morbid pleasure in seeing them die.”

“She must have been mad.”

“I’m not so sure of that. But I quite admit that she was a fool; if she had done her poisoning with a little more circumspection she might have been poisoning yet.”

“It is a very good thing she was not circumspect then; but don’t you see that this very case confirms the theory that murder will out—that a murderer is *ipso facto* a fool, and that nineteen times out of twenty he commits some mistake, or omits some precaution, that is sure to find him out?”

“Nineteen times out of twenty? No, I don’t think that. Nobody can of course say for certain; but I should certainly not think so,” returned Corfe, who spoke with great animation and appeared to be much interested in the subject under discussion. “Nor can I admit that a man who commits what society has agreed to call a crime is necessarily a fool. I suppose the greatest murderer of modern times was Napoleon Bonaparte, but you would not call him a fool.”

“I am not so sure about that, and he was fearfully punished.”

“Not so much as Louis XVI., and he had not the spirit to hurt a fly. If he had been a worse man, he

would have been a better king, and might have died in his bed. It is all very fine, my dear Balmaine, talking about high morality and that, and virtue bringing its own reward. That may do very well for women and children; but with men who know the world it won't wash. People do not get punished or rewarded according to their deserts; and a mere mistake—an error of judgment—often entails worse consequences than a crime. A ship captain in a moment of confusion gives the order 'hard a-starboard,' instead of 'hard a-port,' and two vessels go to the bottom and hundreds of lives are lost. An engine-driver mistakes a signal, and a train, freighted with passengers, is wrecked. Two such accidents cause more suffering than a whole century of murders."

"But you surely don't mean to say, Corfe, that murder is therefore justifiable?"

"Of course not. I merely wanted to point out to you the fallacy of the assumption that bad actions always entail evil consequences on those who commit them, and *vice versâ*. If it were so, all the world would be virtuous. It seems to me—and I have seen a good deal of life, that the men you call unscrupulous—provided they have their wits about them—generally get the best of it."

"I don't agree with you," interrupted Alfred warmly; "I don't think it is in the nature of things that evil should triumph; and I do most sincerely

believe that honesty will beat the other thing in the end—and even though it were not so it would be better to be true than false.”

“As to that I quite agree with you, Balmaine, but I would just observe that if honesty be the best policy, there is no merit in not being a rogue. It is one of those sayings that people accept as a matter of course, without thinking whether they are true or false. Just like that other adage we were speaking of, ‘murder will out.’ They say so because they have no idea how often murders don’t out. Look at the case of this Dr. Samson, for instance. He poisoned his nephew to get his money; but if he had wanted to be found out he could not have done it more clumsily. He buys aconitine in a shop, puts it into a powder and gives it to the boy, who is an invalid, in the presence of a third person. Before Samson leaves the house almost, the nephew falls ill, and he dies the very same night. Twenty four hours later Samson is in custody. The remains of the powder are analysed and found to contain aconitine, and the incident is adduced as proof that murder will out. Now suppose that Dr. Samson, who, remember, is a physician, instead of committing such a *bétise* had prescribed some pills and put his aconitine into only one of them. What would have happened? The nephew would either have taken one of the harmless pills or the poisoned pill first. Suppose that he had done the

latter, though the chances are against it, and the doctor who was called in had suspected poisoning, which is by no means certain, and caused the pills to be analysed, they would have been found perfectly innocuous, and nobody could have said how the poison was administered. If, on the other hand, he had taken three or four of the harmless pills before swallowing the poisoned one, the case against Samson would have been still weaker; and had he used the precaution to distil his aconitine from the roots of the *aconitum napellus*, common wolfsbane, not even his worst enemy would have dared to breathe a word against him."

"Upon my word, Corfe, you make my blood run cold," said Balmaine, half in jest, half in earnest. "I shall begin to think soon you are a dangerous man. I hope you won't take it into your head some day to poison me."

"No fear of that, my dear fellow. But my father thought at one time of making me a doctor, and I attended a course of lectures at an Italian university. Ever since then medical jurisprudence has possessed a singular fascination for me, and I sometimes let the subject run away with me. Nothing interests me more than a poisoning case, and I cannot help looking at the matter from what you may call an artistic point of view, just as De Quincey did. You have read his famous essay on 'Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts,' of course."

"I began it once, but somehow I did not like it, and did not read on to the end. You would make a good detective."

"That does not follow. They say that Gaboriau who wrote such wonderful tales of crime, and whose detectives are simply masterpieces, once tried his hand at unravelling a real crime and signally failed. Still I fancy the *métier* of detective would suit me—if I could stoop to it. I think, though, detectives fail quite as often as they succeed. With a really clever murderer they have no chance, for he does his work so skilfully that nobody knows a murder has been committed."

"Then he must be a poisoner?"

"Well—yes, he must be a poisoner, or a *poisonneuse*, as the French say. The commonly received theory is that women are more prone to poison than men. I don't think so."

"Why?"

"Because, in my opinion, women are oftener found out than men. Being more nervous and emotional they are more apt to betray themselves and to make mistakes. It is so easy to draw a false inference. I have always contended that the number of crimes discovered is no criterion of the number committed."

"You think very badly of human nature then?"

"I do. Anyhow it has behaved very badly to me. But I say (looking at his watch), it is time to be

going. Light a cigar and let us be off. But stay, I must take my wife a shawl. The night is rather chilly, and she is thinly clad. Here it is. *Allons.*"

"You are very thoughtful for your wife," observed Balmaine, who was rather struck by the inconsistency between this proceeding and the cynicism of Corfe's sentiments.

"I ought to be. She is as good as gold. You have no idea how much better I feel now she is with me again. I often wish——"

"What?"

"That I were worth a hundred thousand pounds—for her sake. Then I should——. They say money is the root of all evil, Balmaine. It would be a good deal more to the purpose to say the want of it is. But never mind, I suppose we shall rub on somehow, poor as we are. By-the-bye, how are you getting on with old Gibson?"

"Very well."

"You like him?"

"Yes."

"I don't think Mayo and Leyland do, though. I should not be surprised if there were a row one of these days. Who would succeed him, do you suppose, if he had to go?"

"Really, Corfe, I don't know. And do you think it is friendly to Gibson to discuss the contingency of his being dismissed? For that is what it amounts to."

"Well, if you look at it in that way, you know But I confess, I do not see any harm in putting the question, and you cannot feel better disposed towards Gibson than I do. If he has to leave, it won't be our doing, and talking the matter over cannot hurt him."

"I do not think it can. All the same, Gibson has behaved well to me, and I have a strong feeling that it would not be good form to assume that he is going to be dismissed, nor begin speculating as to who is likely to succeed him."

"You are perhaps right," returned Corfe, coldly ; "so let us drop the subject. I should not have mentioned it, only I have heard hints, and thought you might like to have an idea of what is going on, and likely to happen. Of course all this is entirely between ourselves."

"Of course," said Alfred, and shortly afterwards, having reached a point where their roads diverged, they separated.

Corfe's feelings, as he went on his way alone, were not of the pleasantest, and he was much less satisfied with himself than usual. Besides saying more than he meant to say, he had failed to ascertain whether Balmaine aspired to become Gibson's successor. When a vain man is full of a subject, it is apt to run away with him, and Corfe feared that he had revealed his theories on artistic murder and some other things rather more fully than was

altogether prudent. Still, he did not think any great harm was done. Balmaine was too open, too frank, too green, in fact, to be dangerous. But for that he should have attributed his reticence on the subject of Gibson's dismissal to craft, and concluded therefrom that he meant to get the place if he could. As it was he gave him full credit for sincerity.

"The fellow is a fool," he muttered, as he passed swiftly under the sycamores that lined the road. "I do believe he is quite capable of refusing Gibson's place if it were offered to him. All the same, I must talk no more about that And it must not be poison. Poor Esther! I do wish it could be avoided. If that money had only come to her! Ah, how intensely respectable and generous I could be! I'd build a church, subsidise the parson, and keep the Ten Commandments; and Ward and those other fellows who cut me dead in Pall Mall would offer their congratulations, the confounded curs!"

CHAPTER III.

NEWS FROM CALDER.

As for Alfred, he was rather at a loss what to think. Corfe's theories about murder, and his cynical remarks generally, were reviving his former distrust. He did not know whether to set him down as unprincipled or merely eccentric. On the whole, being of a charitable disposition, Balmaine inclined to the second alternative ; nevertheless, he felt that Corfe was not a man that he could greatly respect, or whom it would be prudent to trust. That was one reason why (although the reason he gave was quite sufficient) he had declined to hold any conversation with him about Gibson. At the same time, it could not be denied that Gibson was acting very unwisely. He left the paper almost altogether to Alfred and the two subs, did not come to the office until late in the evening, and came sometimes the worse for drink. He seemed to be doing his best, in fact, to show that he was not necessary, and that his services might be spared without detriment to the interest of the paper. Balmaine and Delane saw this with regret ; Gibson had always treated them with the utmost kindness,

and, had it been possible they would have warned him of the danger he was running. But their relative positions rendered any such proceeding on their part impossible; a hint even would probably have been resented as an impertinence, and might have done no good; hence, as Delane put it, they were compelled "to let things slide."

A few days later Alfred had letters from Calder. The first was from Cora.

His cousin told him, among other things, that George was in good health and spirits, and the confident hope of speedy promotion, and that his mother was somewhat better. As for herself—well, she had a secret, a great secret to tell him, and she warned him to prepare for a great surprise. She had begun to write a novel. The editor of the *Piccadilly Magazine* having accepted a second short story from her and complimented her thereon (he wants to get another at the same price, thought Alfred,) she was encouraged to try a bolder flight.

"But neither your mother, nor anybody else in Calder," she wrote, "has the least idea of what I am doing, for I have two great fears—that I shall stick fast ignominiously in the middle and never get any farther, and that even if I do finish the story, I shall never get it printed. And I get on awfully slowly. I wrote the first page ten times, and the first chapter three, and still they are not

what they ought to be, so please don't say anything. I have told nobody but you and George."

Not long after he received this letter there came one from Warton, evidently written in rather low spirits, though he did his best to keep up Alfred's. That fellow Murgatroyd, from Halifax, he said, was making things look rather fishy. He told a very straightforward story, and though the clerk did not believe a word he said, it was impossible to prove that the man lied. If Balmaine could only "let on" (find Vera Hardy), it would not, of course, matter what the fellow might choose to say; he might perjure himself until he was black in the face, for anything Warton cared. But unless she or her father (and of the latter contingency there was precious little chance) was found—and that soon—it would be all up a tree, for Ferret and Saintly Sam meant business, there was no mistake about that. Supported by Murgatroyd's testimony, they were going to file a bill for accounts. Much, of course, depended on whether John Hardy's trustees resisted the demand or consented to a friendly suit. He hoped the former, for in that case the affair might be prolonged almost indefinitely, and if there was any chance of the heiress turning up they would be encouraged to fight, as he knew for a fact that Artful hated Ferret like poison, and thought the Hardy Fortune Company nothing less than a public scandal. It therefore behoved Balmaine to see

that Martino quickly and get to know whether the girl was alive or dead, and if alive, what had become of her.

"If I only could," thought Alfred. But Bevis as yet had made no sign, and until he did there was nothing for it but to wait. Not, however, for long. In two months at the outside the Colonel must be in Italy

"I am thinking less about the money now," Warton went on, "though a few thousands, even a few hundreds, even a few score pounds, would be extremely acceptable to yours truly, than of taking the shine out of Saintly Sam. How I hate the smug-faced, sanctimonious old beggar! He has the devil's own luck, and nobody could deserve it less. What do you think now? He has bought that outlying estate of Lord Limefields, at Lindeth. The trustees under the settlement had power to sell it and invest the proceeds in land elsewhere; but they knew nothing of the value of the property, and Sam has got it for an old song. It lies between the railway and the river; there is both coal and limestone in it, and for building purposes it is worth almost anything. Sam has let sites for two mills already, and goes about talking of "my estate at Lindeth" as if it had come to him through a long line of acred ancestors. And that is not all. There is a talk, though I'll be shot if I can believe it, that Lord Limefield's second son, the Honourable Tom Townson, is to marry Lizzie and be our next

member. (I once thought you had a weakness in that quarter.) Sam could return him, of course or anybody else, and I daresay would be willing enough to have a peer's son for his son-in-law, but he would have to make settlements, and old Saintly is awfully fond of his money; he would think pretty often before paying down—say ten thousand pounds—for the honour of being allied with a sprig of nobility. And then, from an aristocratic point of view, the Saintlies cannot be considered an altogether desirable connection. Everybody in Calder knows that Sam is a rogue, and Mrs. Sam, though a decent enough old body, is—well, not the most eligible mother-in-law imaginable. So, taking one thing with another, I don't think Miss Lizzie is likely to become the Honourable Mrs. Tom Townson just yet.

“Did I tell you that Sam is buying up all the shares in the Hardy Fortune Company he can lay his hands on? He has also bought up the claims of the poorer Hardys; and one way and another, if the fortune comes to Calder, Sam will get a good half of it. Another reason for finding that young woman; and even then I expect there will be a fight. The Saint has backed himself too heavily to win, to yield without a struggle, and if he is beaten you may be sure it won't be for want of hard swearing. Murgatroyd won't be the only man that knew the late John Hardy; there are more where

he came from, and we must not forget that finding Philip Hardy's daughter will not end the matter. We shall have to prove his marriage with his Italian wife, also Miss Vera's identity, and that may not be so easy as we should like. But this is neither here nor there. It is like counting chickens before they are hatched. The thing is to find her."

"Exactly," was Balmaine's mental comment "First catch your hare. I only wish I could catch mine. The bother is that I don't know the name she went by. Until I do know I cannot move. Confound that Martino—when will he turn up, I wonder? If I don't hear from Bevis before October I shall just write again to jog his memory. And so Lizzie has found another sweetheart already; for I do believe it is a true bill, in spite of Warton's doubts. Sam Hardy likes being important, and if he made settlements, would get value for his money in more ways than one, and I suppose it would suit Townson very well to get into Parliament. But I don't envy him, and he is quite welcome to Lizzie. She is not fit to be named in the same day as Mademoiselle Leonino. As if I had anything to do with Mademoiselle Leonino! I must make a fortune before I marry a wife. I wish Cora had not put her into my head, with her absurd sentimentalism. I was forgetting all about her. But she has really the finest eyes I ever saw. I wonder whether we shall ever meet again." _

CHAPTER IV.

CORFE MAKES HIMSELF AGREEABLE.

SEPTEMBER for the most part had been a bad month—showery, at times even cold—and the great majority of tourists had either hurried homeward, or betaken themselves to the more genial climates of the south. But October, as it often does in Switzerland, opened splendidly. True, the nights are lengthening, the lakes show by their waning volume that the glaciers are gaining on the sun, snow flakes repose on the rocks of the Salève and whiten the peaks of the Jura, yet the days are bright and balmy, the trees still rejoice in the glory of their autumnal foliage, and the Alps, sharply defined in the clear air, are clothed with all the splendour of their beauty and their majesty, grand as the ocean, mysterious as eternity.

Calm, too, is the lake ; its azure surface, unruffled by the faintest zephyr, reflects in its gentle bosom the smiling villages on its banks, just now gay with frolic and song, for it is full vintage, and great wains are carrying to the wine-press loads of luscious grapes, gathered by lads and lasses to the music of their own laughter. A few days more and the Alps

may be shrouded in storm clouds, and the lake torn by a furious *bise*, but this is St. Martin's summer, the last bright time of the dying year, and everybody seems to enjoy it to the full. The Genevans still live mostly in the *grande air*—under trees, in gardens, at the doors of cafés, and open windows.

None enjoy this second summer more than Esther Corfe; it has all the charm of novelty for her, she is sensitive to external impressions, and Vernon, though subject to occasional fits of gloom and bursts of temper, is almost everything she could wish, and a great deal more than she expected. The time is afternoon; he is smoking a pensive pipe and she is sewing; but every now and then she raises her head and looks towards the mountains, now radiant in the golden light of the sinking sun.

"What is the name of the mountain there, that looks so grand and solitary, sloping upwards and crowned with trees?" she asks.

"That—that is the Voirons," says Corfe, rousing himself.

"And that far away mountain with a double peak, like two horns—what is that?"

"The Dent d'Oche. It is a long way off, and if the horns as you call them, were not powdered with fresh fallen snow you could hardly see them."

"How beautiful it all is! It seems like a dream. What is a glacier like when you are close to it?"

"Awfully dirty."

"Impossible! See how beautifully white Mont Blanc is."

"That is the snow. You cannot distinguish the glaciers from here. But you shall see one if you like. What do you say to going to Chamouni?"

"What do I say to going to Chamouni? I feel as if I would give something very precious—a part of my life even—to go there."

"A part of your life! Why—why—there is no danger in going to Chamouni, you know. What do you mean by saying that, Esther?" almost stammers Corfe, and he is not a man much given to hesitation in speech.

"I only meant that I would like to go very, very much," returns Esther, looking rather surprised.

"Why didn't you say so before? You shall go. We will start to-morrow."

"Are you in earnest, Vernon?"

"Never more so in my life."

"You are a dear good boy. There" (kissing him). "I thank you with all my heart. But can you get away?"

"Easily. The schools have all a fortnight's holiday for the *vendage*. We need not be away more than five or six days, and I can do my copy for the *Helvetic* before we start."

"Shall we leave first thing in the morning?"

"Certainly, by the first boat. We will take the

steamer to Villeneuve, rail to Monthey, and ride on muleback from Vernayaz to Chamouni."

"Oh, how delightful! You are kind" (kissing him a second time). "I will go and get our things ready at once. We have to go out this evening, and there will be no time in the morning. What time does the steamer leave?"

"Seven-fifteen, I think."

"Hang it all!" mutters Corfe, when he is left alone, "I wish she would not be quite so kind and loving. It makes it so confoundedly hard. Shall I do it, after all? I must—there is no help for it. No, I won't. I—— Anyhow, there is no harm in taking her to Chamouni, and then, *nous verrons*. She would give a part of her life to go there! That was rather startling. Little she knows—— It is an awful shame. I wish I could get rid of her without—hang me if I don't. She is as good as gold, that's true; but she isn't worth two millions. Am I sure of getting two millions, though? That is the question. I'll think it over again. To do it and get nothing! That would be a hard case. Come, come, this won't do. I'm losing my courage; letting I dare not wait on I would. And yet everything is in my favour. If I cannot make that girl marry me I am a duffer, and don't deserve her. I shall pose as a man of fortune, and she has been brought up like a peasant. . . . I must go through with it—must—must—Ah! what is that?"

And Corfe started as violently as if a pistol had been fired off at his ear. But it was only Madame Marcquart wanting to know what Monsieur and Madame would like for supper.

Corfe answered rather shortly that they were going out to supper; and then he informed Madame Marcquart that they proposed to start early next morning for Chamouni, and should be away perhaps six or seven days.

"I am very glad to hear it, for the sake of the lady," said Madame Marcquart; "the excursion will do her good. She is *bien bonne*, is Madame Corfe. The possession of such a wife ought to make you very happy, M. Corfe. You must well take care of her, and see that she does not fall down a precipice or get lost on a glacier. *Bon soir*, Monsieur."

And with a little cackle of a laugh, to show that she was only making a *plaisanterie*, the landlady left Corfe to his reflections.

"Confound the old hag! what can she mean?" Corfe asked himself. "Nothing, of course. A chance shot. But how she startled me! Gad, I must watch myself, or I shall be getting nervous and making some confounded mistake, like those duffers I was talking to Balmaine about the other day."

They left Geneva in the grey of the morning. There was a chilly feeling in the air, a fog veiled the mountain-tops and brooded over the town, and as

the boat swept over the dark blue lake, the water rose and fell smoothly, and rippled noiselessly, as if kept down by the weight of the mist.

“It is confoundedly foggy. Are we going to have bad weather, I wonder?” asked Corfe uneasily, as he made a vain effort to scan the horizon.

“Oh, no, I am sure we are not,” answered Esther eagerly. “The glass is rising, and and I heard the captain say just now ‘*il va s’éclaircir*.’ It is only the morning glory.”

“Confound the morning glory! I wish there was not quite so much of it. It’s awfully cold,” said Corfe peevishly. He was always in a bad humour when he rose early. “Let us go below and have some coffee while it clears itself—if it’s going to.”

Esther acquiesced, though she would rather have remained on deck.

A cup of excellent coffee and a couple of *feras* (little trout) cured Corfe of his moroseness. To use a simile of the ring, he came up smiling; a cigar, and the gleam of sunshine which saluted them as they reached the deck, restored him to a serener temper, and he chatted so pleasantly with Esther that an American, who was one of the few passengers, remarked to a travelling companion what a nice fellow that Englishman seemed to be, and how very fond he was of his wife; and when he heard Corfe address a few words to the captain, expressed

a wish that he could speak French half as well.

The lake seemed to smoke, the mist was moving over the face of the water and melting in the sun, and soon the picturesque villages, the graceful villas and sloping gardens, the gleaming meadows and gay vineyards that gem the shores of the *Leman* were revealed in all their loveliness. The higher valleys were still hidden, but above the billowy clouds that hung between earth and sky the sombre summits of the *Jura* and the glittering peaks of the *Alps* rose like islands in a silver sea.

Esther was greatly delighted, and expressed her admiration in the effusive language of an excited girl; but Corfe cared more for the sunshine than the scenery, with which, as he observed, he was too familiar to go into ecstasies about it. Being, however, in a genial mood and disposed to be chatty, he pointed out to his companion various places of historic interest on the shores of the lake. As they passed the ivy-mantled keep of the *Château of Yvoire* he related the legend of Iron-fisted John. How a certain Baron of *Yvoire*, who belonged to a race that claimed descent from the god *Neptune*, returned home after a long absence in Eastern lands with a black horse and a Moorish servant, and how the country people gave him the name of *Jean au Bras de Fer*, because he had lost part of his right arm and wore an iron one in its stead—and a

great deal more, including Jean's love story, which though it greatly interested the travellers, would probably not be found very entertaining by English readers.

"How much of it is true?" enquired one of the Americans, both of whom had listened to the story with great attention.

"About a tenth, I should say. Bras de Fer is an historic personage, but the exploits attributed to him are mostly legendary.

The interest shown by Esther and the Americans flattered him; he liked being a centre of observation; and he told two or three other stories, and gave useful information concerning the places they passed—lore that he had picked up at odd times, and more than once turned to profitable account by acting as amateur cicerone to parties of distinguished foreigners.

Before the steamer reached Villeneuve the Americans, who were also bound for Chamouni, proposed that they should travel thither in company. Corfe objected that they had Cook's tickets, and were going to Martigny, while he and his wife were going by Vernayaz.

"Hang Cook's tickets," said the older and the burlier of the tourists; "we would sacrifice them twice over for the pleasure of travelling with a gentleman like you, who speaks the language like a native, and knows the country better than Baedeker."

Corfe hesitated. He had reasons for not wanting company, but the compliment pleased him—it may be that a good impulse moved him—and he closed with the American's proposal.

They all alighted at Vernayaz station, rode up the tremendous and almost interminable zigzag, which the burly American declared to be a thousand times higher than Jacob's ladder, to a little inn, where they spent the night. It was agreed that they should start at seven on the following morning for Chamouni. But a few minutes after the time appointed, and when all was ready for departure, American number two appeared on the scene, said sorrowfully that his friend had been taken ill in the night, and would probably not be able to leave until the next day, and suggested that Mr. and Mrs. Corfe should go on without them. After a few expressions of regret the Corfes went on alone.

CHAPTER V.

AMONG THE MOUNTAINS.

It was a fatality. Had the Americans joined them the terrible event which shortly afterwards befell might never have come to pass. Corfe, by one of those inconsistencies to which human nature is prone, though in the first instance he had been annoyed by the Americans thrusting their company upon him, now almost regretted that they were staying behind. It is possible that he wanted saving from himself, for there must be times when a man who is planning a deed of horror—unless he be already brutalised by crime—would fain be hindered by some external influence from carrying his design into effect. Corfe had experienced several of these lucid intervals; from time to time he half renounced his purpose: and the nearer he came to its accomplishment the greater became his hesitation. He never looked at Esther without feeling how hard it would be to act when the moment arrived for which he had been so long preparing. She was so bright; she enjoyed life so much, and seemed so happy. And he liked her: she was a pleasant companion; she never bored him, and her love was gratifying to his self-esteem. Yet he

always came round to the same point. Even in the agonies of irresolution Vera Hardy and her fortune lured him onward. And he had dwelt so much on the idea of murder, brooded over his project so often and so fondly, that it had come to have a positive fascination for him. It was so clever, so original, and did its author so much credit, that it seemed almost a shame not to carry it into effect. Sometimes he was in one mood, sometimes in the other; yet even in his better moments, when pity and such conscience as he had left fought most strenuously against the evil influence that was dragging him to his fate, he had always, deep down in his mind, a foreboding, amounting to conviction, that he should return to Geneva alone—that this was the last journey he and Esther would ever take together.

This was his thought as he helped her to mount her mule at the door of the Hotel de Salvan, and in spite of himself he shuddered.

“You are cold, Vernon dear,” she said caressingly. “Here, let me fasten this wrap round your neck,” and suiting the action to the word, she stooped from her saddle and folded a soft white shawl about his throat.

“It is rather chilly,” he replied in a husky voice, “but the sun is rising and I shall be warm presently; and yes” (drawing a flask from his pocket), “I will take just a *soupçon* of cognac.”

He took a good deal more than a *soupçon*, and,

as Esther observed with some misgiving, he had lately drunk more both of wine and cognac than could be good for him ; but she made no remark, and they rode on for some time in silence, for the air was so sharp and keen that she covered up her mouth with a muffler, and Vernon did not seem in a mood for conversation. His mind was agitated though his face was calm, and just then talking would have been painful to him. Had he been in a more observant temper, he would probably have noticed that his companion was quieter than usual, and that her countenance wore an expression pensive even to sadness. Something troubled her. Whether some old memory, a feeling that she was lavishing her love on a man unworthy of it, or a foreboding of evil, who can tell ? But as the sun rose higher and the morning mist faded in his beams, and range after range of Alpine giants, draped in dazzling white, uprose around her, their brows crowned with icy rocks, silent as the dead yet resplendent in the pride of their beauty and their strength, her melancholy followed the vanishing mist, and she became as excited and enthusiastic as before.

Her exclamations and remarks rather amused Corfe, but he showed only a languid interest in the Alpine world around them.

“ You have seen it all before,” she said pettishly, “ and don’t care. But however often I were to see them, I do not think these mountains would lose

their charm for me. You have no poetry in your soul, Vernon, or you could not look unmoved on a scene like this."

They are in a wild valley strewn with erratic blocks. Its rugged and storm-rent slopes are dotted with two or three solitary chalets, and down the middle of it dashes and boils a mountain stream, as yet, for the day is young, unmixed with "glacier milk," and as clear as crystal. Patches of pines silvered with hoar frost fringe the lower heights, and between them and the advancing snow-line may be discerned oases of green pastures, veritable emeralds of the Alps in a setting of winter.

"Hark!" exclaimed Esther, reining in her mule, "what is that?"

It is a sound overhead, as it seems from the snow; at first a confused murmur, then swelling into a diapason of shouting and "yoedelling," mingled with the music of bells, the lowing of cattle, and the blast of an Alpine horn.

The muleteer pointed towards the pine woods.

"They are bringing the cattle down from the Alps," said Corfe.

And Esther, turning her gaze in the direction pointed out by the muleteer, saw emerging from a clump of trees a long stream of cows, goats, and young horses, followed by men, and lads and lasses, the latter in gay folks' dresses, all carrying something:—milking-stools, pots, pans, kettles, and

other household gear, either on their backs or their heads.

"I know, I know," almost shouted Esther, dropping her reins and clapping her hands. "I have read about it in books; I have seen it in pictures. They are bringing home the cattle from the Alps. How picturesque it all is! Oh, Vernon, I never felt before that I was really in Switzerland!"

"You are not in Switzerland now."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we have crossed the border, and this is Savoy."

"Never mind that; I don't care about political divisions. This may belong to France, but we are in a mountain land all the same, and you must let me call it Switzerland, Vernon dear. Do you know, I feel as if I should like to stay in it as long as I live! I wonder if I shall! What do you think, Vernon?"

"I think—if you do—I hope you will live a long time," answered Corfe with outward calm, though with inward effort. The question was too suggestive to be pleasant.

"You would wish that in any case, I hope, Vernon; but I mean, do you think we are likely to stay in Switzerland a long time?"

"Tell me how long we shall remain poor, and I will tell you how long we shall stay in Switzerland."

"In that case I almost hope we may always remain poor. I think I would rather be poor in Switzerland than rich in England."

"By Jove! but I would not," said Corfe, abruptly. "If I had ten thousand a year, London or Paris should be my home, Esther."

"Ten thousand a year!" laughed Esther. "What a prodigious sum! Wouldn't five thousand satisfy you, *mon cher*?"

"On the principle that half a loaf is better than no bread, certainly. Yes, I should be mighty glad of five thousand a year; but really to enjoy life nowadays you should have ten thousand."

"Well, there is no telling. Perhaps somebody will leave one of us ten thousand a year, or I may die, and then you can marry money, you know."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Corfe, with an abruptness that startled and surprised his companion.

Then the subject dropped, and they rode on in silence. The conversation evidently disturbed Esther, for, much as she loved Corfe, she was neither blind to his faults nor, remembering what had happened in the past, without misgivings as to what might befall her in the future. If her jest so far became earnest that he should have a chance, even in her lifetime, of marrying money, what would happen? The question was a painful one, for her hold over him was limited to Geneva, and depended entirely on what he called his poverty.

Were he by any means to become independent of the goodwill of his patrons, he might set her at defiance.

As for Corfe, the mention of money had set him a-thinking once more of Vera Hardy, her millions, and the pleasures they would purchase. Vera was a fine girl. He knew that he should sooner or later get tired of Esther—*on las de manger toujours du même pain*—and there was a touch of raillery in her tone just now which he did not at all like. Yes, the game was worth the candle. To funk it now, at the last moment, would be the merest poltroonery and a great mistake. Never would he have such another chance. No risk, and—if his scheme succeeded—hardly an effort. A touch, possibly a scream—but that would not matter—and all would be over as quickly as a flash of lightning. And then, for the hundredth time, he mentally rehearsed the scene to its minutest detail. Yet, though he hardened his heart, he could not repress a great inward fear.

“I wish it were over!” he muttered, through his set teeth.

When they reached the Argentières glacier, it was in deep shade, for the sun was low.

“And that is a glacier?” said Esther, stopping her mule. “Well, I am disappointed. How stern and gloomy it looks, as if some terrible crime had been committed there, and it was for ever accursed.”

The scene almost justifies Esther's description. A half-darkness, rendered ghastly by looming masses of corpse-like snow, broods over the upper part of the ravine from which the glacier descends ; on either side rise black and splintered rocks ; the broad ice-stream is strewn with huge blocks of stone, like the fragments of a blasted planet, and ever and anon can be heard the boom of a rolling boulder or the crash of a falling avalanche.

For a few minutes Esther gazed on the wild waste of snow and ice and wreck as if fascinated. "It's awfully grand," she said at length, drawing a deep breath ; "but there is something in it that almost frightens me. Let us go on, Vernon."

"I do not see anything awful in it," answered Corfe, in a matter-of-fact way. "I thought you would be disappointed ; people always are the first time they see a glacier. But wait until you see another or two, and by daylight. To-morrow or the next day we will go to the Mer de Glace. It is not like this."

"I am very glad, for if all glaciers were like this, I should never want to see another. It is horrible enough to be one of the ways into Hades and peopled by ghosts and hob-goblins."

"That's all nonsense," returned Corfe. "*Allons !* let us push on ; it's past dinner-time, and I am getting awfully peckish."

An hour later they were in the *salle à manger* of

the Hôtel du Mont Blanc, and Esther, fortified by an excellent meal, quickly got over the impression made on her by her first glacier, and declared herself eager for an excursion to Montanvert and the Mer de Glace.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SÉRACS DU GÉANT.

It was late on the following morning when Corfe and Esther came down to breakfast. The long ride and the keen air had acted as an anodyne, and they slept both soundly and long.

When Esther spoke of the proposed excursion, Corfe, who seemed to be in a lazy mood, said it was almost too late to start on so long a journey, and suggested that they should put it off until the morrow.

Esther looked disappointed. She little guessed that the change of plan gave her an additional twenty-four hours of life.

"The Mer de Glace is not the only thing to be seen at Chamouni," he observed, with a smile; "we can make some shorter and easier excursion."

"Very well; let us set out then," she returned, rising from the table. "The sun is bright and the day is getting on. I can be ready in five minutes."

"All right," said Corfe, lighting a cigar; "get ready; you will find me at the door. I'll ask one

of the guides about the condition of the mountains and what excursion he can recommend."

Esther was nearly as good as her word. Her five minutes stretched only to fifteen. She found Corfe in conversation with a guide, whom he called Valentine. He had come to the conclusion that the pleasantest excursion they could undertake would be to the Col de Brévent. They might make the greater part of the ascent on muleback; and though snow had fallen on the summit, they would be able, thought Valentine, to reach it without difficulty, and the view it afforded of the chain of Mont Blanc and the valley of the Sixt was superb.

In this proposal Esther acquiesced with alacrity. She would go anywhere Vernon thought best, she said, only she should like to see the Mer de Glace before they went back.

"Of course," answered Corfe; "nobody comes to Chamouni without seeing the Mer de Glace. We will go to Montanvert to-morrow, and if you like, make an excursion to the Jardin or the Séracs du Géant."

Esther said she should like very much, and the mules being brought round, they started for the Col de Brévent. When they reached a hut, near the top, they dismounted, for the track had become impracticable even for mules, and snow lay thick in the hollows.

"Is that a glacier?" asked Esther, pointing to a

wide stretch of snow which lay between them and the summit.

"Not exactly," returned Corfe, rather loftily, for even in trifles he was never above the vanity of showing his superior knowledge. "That is merely snow, which has probably fallen during the last few days. The Brévent is clear in summer. A glacier is ice, as you will see to-morrow."

Esther was in great spirits.

"This is really mountaineering," she cried to Corfe, as the guide stamped steps for her with his feet, and helped her up the snow slope. "I do so enjoy it; don't you, Vernon?"

"Very much, indeed. I like it immensely," answered Corfe, ironically, and with a half groan; for his game leg was troubling him a little, his wind had suffered from his life in Geneva, and he had quite lost his taste for mountaineering. If he had yielded to impulse he would have been very cross; but he kept his temper from policy, and Esther was too much occupied with her climbing to observe the shade on her companion's countenance.

"*Voici!*" exclaimed Valentine at length, pulling her on a ridge free from snow, "we are arrived at the summit."

And then Esther looked round and saw before her a sight the like of which she had never yet beheld. From the coign of vantage where she stood her eye took in the entire range of Mont Blanc, now white

from base to summit, except where some dark pinnacle of rock pierced the sky or the ice of a glacier gleamed like an amethyst in the sun.

"So white, so still, and so solemn," she said slowly, after a long pause. "It makes me think of death, Vernon, dear!"

"Why—why of death?" stammered Corfe, who stood beside her leaning on his alpenstock.

"Because it seems to me that up yonder, on those serene heights, there can be no life, and the stillness must be as complete as that of the grave."

"Come now, Esther, do let us discuss something more cheerful than death and the grave. You make me feel quite uncomfortable."

"Why should mention of death make you feel uncomfortable? When you left me, and I was in such sore trouble, I often longed for death. And there may be more trouble in store for me yet—who can tell? I once heard Rabbi Simeon say that it may be a greater misfortune to live than to die; and I have sometimes thought that it is best to die when you are happy, and before fresh troubles come—if it please God to take you."

"What strange ideas you have, Esther! Why should you have such gloomy thoughts? You were cheerful enough just now."

"And shall be again presently. It was the sight of those mountains. How like eternity they are!"

“Eternity!” said Corfe, with a half sneer. “What will you be saying next, I wonder? Let us change the subject. Do you see that great mass of white streaked with blue?—a little to the right there, like a great frozen cascade?”

“Yes.”

“Well, about this time to-morrow we shall not be far from the foot of that cascade,” said Corfe, with a curious glance at Esther.

“I hope it won’t tumble on us,” returned the girl, pleasantly, for she was now as cheerful as a little while before she had been sad.

“No fear of that. I have too great a regard for you—and myself, too, for that matter—to run into danger. And we shall take Valentine with us, of course.”

Then they descended the mountain, Vernon holding Esther’s hand and paying her great attention. Once, however, she slipped, to Corfe’s dismay, and if the guide had not been in front and stopped her by running diagonally across the snow slope, she might have gone over a precipice. Corfe’s anxiety on this occasion was quite touching. He could not run very fast on account of his leg, but when he came up to Esther he took her in his arms and kissed her. The incident impressed Valentine greatly, and when he was talking matters over in the evening with the guide-in-chief, he expressed the opinion that the English gentle-

man and wife were newly married, Monsieur seemed so fond of Madame.

Before they separated it was agreed that the guide should be at the hotel door with two mules at eight o'clock next morning.

Valentine was true to the tryst, though he had not the least expectation that his *voyageurs* would be, and nine o'clock had gone before Esther and Corfe appeared on the scene, alpenstocks in hand and ready for a start. Corfe was in one of his taciturn humours and had very little to say; but even if he had been in a more genial mood, it would not have been easy to hold a conversation while riding up the steep ascent, several yards behind his companion. But by the time they reached Montanvert he had grown quite amiable, and repeated sips from his brandy-flask (furtively taken) so effectually loosened his tongue that he became both talkative and jocular.

At Montanvert they leave the mules, and after a light repast, which Corfe washes down with the greater part of a bottle of Bordeaux, they begin the second stage of their journey; keeping the vast ice stream to their left they follow its course along the mountain side until a spot is reached where it is possible, though not very easy, to descend on the glacier. For the bank of the moraine, worn by the weather and undermined by the pressure of the ice stream, has fallen in, so they have to climb over

and double huge boulders, and Valentine has to stamp steps for them in the friable earth, just as he had done the day before in the soft snow. At length the glacier is reached, but its surface is so thickly covered with stones and soil that were it not for the occasional crevasse they would hardly know they were walking on ice. But the path is so rugged and the boulders are so big and so numerous that the climbers are compelled to take once more to the mountain side; yet only to go down a second time on the glacier, which is becoming gradually smoother, cleaner, and more ice-like. Above them towers the dark and majestic Aiguille Noire, before them rises the white and blue fissured crest of the Glacier du Géant, like some mightier Niagara, arrested in mid career and turned into ice by the touch of an Almighty hand. Above the glacier stretches a wide expanse of glittering snow. Before them are splintered peaks, wild ravines, and savage precipices; below them the icy sea crawls like a gigantic snake towards the valley. The wild scene is lighted up by a brilliant sunshine, and a cloud banner floats from the Aiguille du Dru in a sky of clearest azure.

But hark! What is that?

It is the crash of a stone falling from the Aiguille Noire, followed by the thunder of an ice avalanche from the Glacier du Géant. And then Esther learns that the serene heights of the Alpine world are neither so silent nor so devoid of life as she had

thought, for she hears the sound of running water, and Valentine points to an eagle flying between the snow and the sun.

The guide holds Esther's hand to steady her footsteps, sometimes lending a hand to Corfe as well, for they have many ugly ice hummocks to surmount, and some awkward crevices to double. After an unusually hard scramble Corfe calls a halt, whereupon they sit down on a boulder and eat some sandwiches and Corfe refreshes himself freely from his flask.

"Are there any *moulins* about here?" he asks the guide while offering him a cigar.

"Yes, we shall pass a big one in a few minutes—don't you hear it?"

"I think I do; not very distinctly though. But it appears to come from under the glacier."

"One can hear nothing under the glacier. It is too deep."

"Those moulins go to the bottom of the glacier, I suppose?"

"Of course; where else could they go?"

"How deep are they?"

"Who knows? Perhaps a hundred feet, perhaps more."

"What is it all about? What is a moulin?" asks Esther.

"Tell madame what a moulin is, Valentine," says Corfe, as he takes another sip of brandy.

On this the guide explains that they are coming

to a part of the glacier which is almost unbroken, where dribblets of water, instead of disappearing in the rifts, form rills which, joining together, form broad rivulets, and cut deep channels in the ice. The stream so formed sooner or later reaches a point where the ice is cracked, and the water, arrested in its course, finds its way to the bottom of the glacier. But as the stream runs with great force it gradually shapes out a shaft, wide almost as the mouth of a coal pit, and of a tremendous depth, wherein the water plunges with a hollow and thunder-like roar.

"Now you hear it distinctly enough," exclaims Valentine, when they were once more afoot. "Listen !"

It is a heavy rumbling sound like distant thunder, which grows louder as they advance.

"How curious !" says Esther. "I should like to see one of these moulins."

"We shall be at it directly. This is a very large one."

The sound grows louder and louder, and more like real thunder, and then the swish of water is heard and they see in the smooth ice a large cavernous hole. They draw nearer and look into its awful depths. It is a shaft bored through the blue ice, into which leaps wildly a cascade of white water.

"I say, Valentine," calls Corfe, who is a few yards in the rear, "I have left my flask down at

the boulder there. I wish you would fetch it for me; I am beginning to feel a little tired. We will wait for you here."

"*Parfaitement, Monsieur.* I shall not be five minutes."

"What an awesome sight it is!" says Esther, "and what a wild scene all round! It almost makes me feel afraid."

"Nonsense! What is there to be afraid of? Yes, these moulins are very curious. Give me your hand and come a little closer."

"How your hand trembles, Vernon! Are you afraid, too?"

"Not a bit; but I am cold with sitting on that confounded boulder. I will put my gloves on. You can stand alone half a minute. But take care, the ice is very slippery and——"

The next moment a piercing shriek rings through the air, and when Valentine, who is barely two hundred yards away, turns round, he sees only one figure standing by the moulin.

"The lady has fallen in," he says, and then hurries back at full speed.

Corfe is bending over the moulin in an attitude of despair, his arms extended, and face as pale as death.

"She has gone!" he exclaims wildly, "fallen into that horrible hole. I let go her hand to put on my gloves; then she moved a little forward—and—"

and the very same moment I heard her shriek and saw her fall. I clutched at her dress but it was too late! It tore; see, I have a bit of it in my hand! I should not have let go her hand. Oh! I should not have let go her hand. But can nothing be done? Cannot we get ropes?"

"There are no ropes nearer than Chamouni, and if we had a thousand they would be of no use. The poor lady is dead already, Monsieur. You will never see your wife again until you meet her in heaven."

"But the body," says Corfe eagerly, "can we not recover the body? Oh, my poor, poor Esther!"

"Impossible! the body is at the bottom of the glacier, and will not reappear until the day of judgment. It is a great misfortune and I shall be much blamed, Monsieur."

"Why, why should any one blame you, Valentine? You have done nothing wrong."

"Yes, I have; I neglected my duty. I should not have left you alone at the mouth of the moulin; but Monsieur asked me to fetch his flask and I could not well refuse. You will say so to the *guide-en-chef*, will you not, Monsieur?"

"I do not think you are in the least to blame, Valentine. The fault is entirely mine, and I shall say so to the chief guide and everybody else."

"A thousand thanks, Monsieur; I am sorry to

trouble Monsieur about myself at so terrible a moment ; but when a guide loses his character as guide he loses his living, and I have a wife and children."

And then Valentine led Corfe away from the fatal moulin, and they set their faces towards Montanvert. Corfe, who seemed to be overcome with excitement and emotion, and was probably unnerved by the drink he had taken, walked so unsteadily that the guide had much difficulty in getting him across the glacier and up the moraine.

Long before the two men gained Montanvert, the sun had set in a blood-red sky. As they descended the mountain in pitchy darkness, Corfe spoke never a word, and when they reached the Hotel du Mont Blanc he was in such a state of mental and physical prostration that he had to be helped from his mule and led straightway to his bedroom.

CHAPTER VII.

CRUMBS OF COMFORT.

THE tidings of the terrible accident on the *Mer de Glace* (conveyed in a letter to Gibson from one of the Americans whose acquaintance the Corfes had made on the steamer), caused, as was natural, a great sensation at Geneva.

Mr. Corfe, said the writer, being completely unmanned by the shock, had requested him (Rufus T. Choke) to write in his stead. He gave a full account of what had befallen, and stated that in the course of a day or two, when Mr. Corfe could command himself sufficiently to converse and travel, he should return to Geneva. In the meantime he would take it as a great favour if Mr. Gibson, out of consideration for the feelings of Mrs. Corfe's relatives, would say in the paper no more about the sad event than was absolutely necessary.

Means were also taken to prevent much being said in Swiss and French papers, and though the accident was briefly described in the *Faits Divers* of most of them, Corfe had written his name in the visitors' book of the hotel in such a fashion that it looked like "Lorph," and being in some instances

transformed into "Lerph," in others "Dorph," he was set down as a German; so it came to pass that few of his friends (except in Geneva) and none of Esther's heard for a long time of his loss and her fate.

When the bereaved man appeared at Geneva a week after the accident, he became an object of general sympathy, and even people whose capacity in that way was of the slightest had a morbid curiosity to see the survivor of the catastrophe, and hear an account of it from his own lips. Leyland, Mayo, and Gibson, together with their wives, and many others, paid him visits of condolence. The editor spoke in a manly, straightforward way of his respect for the deceased and his sorrow for her death, assured Corfe that they all felt for him in his great misfortune, and that he personally should only be too glad to do for him whatever lay in his power. Mrs. Gibson, who called with Mrs. Mayo, could not well have been more effusive if the late Mrs. Corfe had been her nearest relative or her closest friend.

"When Mr. Gibson told me," she said, half-weeping, "I was so much overcome that I nearly fainted away. He had to fetch the smelling-salts and give me a *petit verre de cognac*. Such a nice lady; so young, too, and to die such a dreadful death! She was quite an acquisition to our little society here; always so bright and cheerful. We

all feel for you—indeed we do, Mr. Corfe. And you had not even the melancholy satisfaction of giving her Christian burial! No funeral, no coffin, no anything! How you must feel it! How you must have felt when you saw her slip down that horrible hole!”

“I cannot tell you how I felt, Mrs. Gibson,” returned Corfe in a broken voice, “but I know that if the guide had not held me I should have jumped down after her.”

“I can well believe it; you must have been quite frantic. But that would have been sacrificing yourself without doing your poor wife any good, and you will meet again in another world, you know.” (“I wonder if Gibson would jump down a hole after me?” she thought). “Here is a little tract I have brought for you. If you will just glance at it I feel sure you will get comfort. That is its name; it is called ‘Crums of Comfort for the Afflicted.’”

“Thank you, Mrs. Gibson, you are really too kind,” returned Corfe, with a grimace that Mrs. Gibson did not see.

“And I am sure you will be very lonely when you are here of an evening, all alone, thinking of her that is gone. Be sure to step up to our pension whenever you feel disposed. It will be a change for you, and we shall always be glad to see you. And don’t fret any more than you can help, Mr. Corfe. There is no necessity, if you can only think

so, for she is happier than we are, poor lady, removed as she has been in a mysterious way from this vale of tears. Keep up your strength with good food, though you may have to force yourself. When you are in trouble there's nothing like good living ; and I ought to know, for I have had a deal of it. You will be sure to come up now, won't you, whenever you feel disposed ? ”

Corfe assured her that he would, and after Mrs. Mayo had given him a similar invitation on behalf of herself and her husband, the ladies, with a renewed expression of their sympathy, took their departure.

“Confound her tract, the old humbug!” exclaimed Corfe, as soon as he was alone, at the same time throwing the unfortunate pamphlet into the fire without even glancing at the title. “Comfort, indeed ! It is plain to see where she gets her comfort. I wonder how much she costs Gibson in Bordeaux and Madeira ? ”

Among other callers were Balmaine and Delane. Any dislike or distrust which Alfred might previously have entertained for Corfe was, for the moment at least, completely forgotten in the terrible misfortune which had overtaken him, and warmly as he spoke, he was not able to express all that he felt.

Corfe seemed touched, and expressed his sense of his visitors' kindness in fitting terms. He looked pale and worn, too ; the emotions and anxieties of

the last few days, together with unwonted indulgence in spirituous liquors, had told upon him, and the suit of solemn black which he wore heightened the effect. But he was far from feeling as bad as he looked. The fear of Esther's reappearance—illusory as he knew it to be—was gradually ceasing to trouble him, and the attention he was receiving pleased him exceedingly. He had become famous; he was the most important person in the English colony; gratified vanity made him oblivious to all sense of remorse and regret. He had only two worries. He sometimes saw in his dreams the terror-stricken face of poor Esther as she went down into the moulin; and more than once he had wakened with her death-shriek ringing in his ears. This was certainly very unpleasant, and he was not sure that he did not talk in his sleep, but that he looked upon as a passing weakness which time would cure. The other trouble was Madame Marcquart. Madame Corfe's death had been a terrible shock to the poor woman. In her grief she even accused Corfe of carelessness in letting his wife fall into the moulin.

Why did he take *cette pauvre dame* into so dangerous a place? she asked. Had she not warned him? If he had well loved her he could not have committed such a folly.

A sharp answer from Corfe put a stop to these upbraidings, yet he could neither ignore the re-

proaches she looked nor dry the tears she was shedding nearly all day long. But it was at any rate possible to escape the infliction by going away, and he told his friends that, feeling himself quite unable to bear the loneliness and associations of his old lodgings, he was about to take temporary quarters at the Hotel Pension Ducrot. Everybody applauded his design; they said that the change would do him good, and prevent him from brooding too much over his loss. But when he gave Madame Marcquart notice he could see by the look she gave him that the sharp old Suisse neither believed in the sincerity of his sorrow, nor regretted his approaching departure.

"I loved your wife much, Monsieur," she said in a trembling voice; "so young, so beautiful, and so good. She was too good for you, Monsieur Corfe. That was indeed a terrible accident. I have thought much about it, and I cannot understand—— Do you think," she continued abruptly after a momentary pause, looking him full in the face, "do you think that if the guide had not turned his back the poor lady would have fallen down the moulin all the same?"

The question was a surprise for Corfe, and threw him quite off his guard. Do what he might he could not help changing colour.

"What do you mean?" he asked fiercely. "Of course she would have fallen all the same."

And then the subject dropped, for Madame Marcquart seemed to have nothing more to say and Corfe had no wish to continue the conversation. He feared his landlady was beginning to suspect that Esther's death was not altogether the pure mishap which it seemed. The fear gave him great concern; he asked himself anxiously whether the same thought could have occurred to anybody else? After long cogitation, he decided in the negative.

"Nobody can have seen it," he thought. "I was so close to her, my arm round her waist—it was not my fault that she slipped. All over in two seconds. No. Besides, if anybody had seen it they could not possibly have suspected anything. And nobody did see it. I looked all round and Valentine had his back turned and was going the other way. He did not suspect anything. And yet that old woman evidently does suspect something. She liked Esther so much and is of a jealous disposition, that's it. If Esther had died here in her bed Madame Marcquart would have accused the doctor of killing her because he did not cure her. Yes, she is a woman of that sort. But she can prove nothing and dare not say anything. And nobody else is likely to have any sort of suspicion—nobody else—that's a safe conclusion, I think—and a considerable comfort."

Nevertheless, he did not feel altogether reassured. He saw for the first time how easy it would be for

suspicion to grow. It would never do to let it be seen that he had any interest in getting Esther out of the way. He must let Vera Hardy alone until a decent time for mourning had elapsed. This was a disappointment and something more. It imperilled his scheme, for delays are proverbially dangerous. But of the two dangers between which he had to choose this seemed to be the less. Too great haste, moreover, might create an unfavourable impression on Vera, it being just conceivable (though he sincerely hoped not) that she had heard of the incident on the *Mer de Glace*.

CHAPTER VIII.

THREE MISSES AND A HIT.

WINTER was mostly a quiet time in the office of the *Helvetic News*. Fewer people called and fewer incidents befel than in summer. The visitors' list was shorter, advertisements were scarcer, and the big safe downstairs, though it looked as imposing as ever, was even emptier than usual. It was a time when Leyland generally betook himself to Mentone or Nice, and Mayo spent most of his afternoons playing whist or billiards at the Hotel de la Croix, occasions on which he was generally accompanied by Gibson, who had issued a standing order that whenever he did not turn up at the office by four o'clock Balmaine was to do the leader. This arrangement enabled him to avoid the disagreeable necessity of leaving in the middle of a game, and it was not often that he reached the office before half-past five or six, or did more than look over a few proofs.

Nothing could be more friendly than the editor's relations with the manager, and he little suspected

that Mayo took means every morning to ascertain by whom the principal leading article had been written, often making a record thereof in a little book which he kept expressly for the purpose.

Gibson had even ceased to reserve for himself the writing of strictly political articles. Alfred could write them quite as well as himself (Mayo and Delane thought better), and as his Swiss experience was fast undermining his Tory principles, he had now no difficulty in adopting the liberal tone which the paper professed. His political ideas had been rather a bundle of prejudices inherited from his father than reasonable convictions well thought out—prejudices which, as he could not help seeing, were in flagrant contradiction with many of the facts around him.

It was not, however, all at once that Balmaine outgrew the political garments of his youth; they dropped from him one by one, and he became a Liberal almost without knowing it. The change did not surprise Gibson. When Alfred produced his first Liberal leader he simply thought the young fellow was learning sense.

“It is very good,” he said, “but if anything rather too strong. Draw it a little milder next time. Most of our American readers are Rads, I know; but, on the other hand, we have a good many Tories among the English. We must not tread on their toes too much, you know.”

Alfred smiled. He had not yet learnt that the supreme duty of an editor is to pocket his principles and please his proprietors.

When Mayo read the article, and knew who had written it, he smiled too.

“Leyland is quite right,” he thought. “These fellows are always ready to write whatever they are told. It is only a few months since that Balmaine was running a Tory paper, and now he pitches into the Tory party just to save Gibson the trouble. I do believe Gibson gets lazier every day. He leaves everything to those lads. *Tant mieux*; it suits our book to a T. So much the better, too, that Balmaine is not more strait-laced than other folks. An editor with a conscience is a devil of a nuisance.”

As for the Hardy mystery, Christmas came and went without bringing more light. The riddle remained as insoluble as ever. To Warton’s periodical requests for news, Balmaine could only give the stereotyped reply, that he had none, for whenever he wrote to Bevis, he received always the same answer—that Martino had not yet returned from Algeria. So he had to possess his soul in patience, and this he found all the easier that both his mind and his time were well occupied with other matters. In addition to his work in the office of the *Helvetic News*, he was doing occasional articles for an English daily paper. But he had arrived at this result only

after making several abortive attempts in various quarters.

But time revived his courage, and a good subject turning up not long afterwards, he resolved to make another attempt. The article was written and dispatched, and for the next fortnight Balmaine read diligently every day the journal to which he had sent it, in the not very confident expectation of seeing his letter. Then he abandoned hope, and in his disgust looked at the paper no more than sufficed him to gather, for his editorial guidance, the gist of its leaders and the purport of its telegrams.

Another fortnight elapsed, and he had almost forgotten the article and got over his disappointment, when one day as he was hard at work with his pen, and Delane with his scissors, the sub-editor uttered an exclamation.

"Hello!" he said, "who has done this. 'The Swiss Communal System: from a Swiss Correspondent.' It cannot be—yes, it must be you, Balmaine. And it does not read badly either."

Balmaine looked up with an air of eager surprise.

"Let me look at it," he exclaimed.

Yes, it was indeed his article; and that was not all. The editor of the *Day* had written a leader about it, and called him "our intelligent correspondent."

Alfred did not say very much, yet he was deeply gratified, and it was not long before he let the *Day*

have something else, which appeared in due course, and after a while he became its acknowledged correspondent at Geneva. The result was an addition to his income, considerable while it lasted; but during the parliamentary session it was only from time to time that the editor was able to find room for his contributions.

Others besides Delane noticed Balmaine's letters in the *Day*. When Gibson knew by whom they were written he paid his assistant a handsome compliment on his industry, and delivered a little homily on the value of that useful quality for the benefit of Delane and Milnthorpe.

One day Corfe dropped into the office in his usual free-and-easy manner, but dressed in deep mourning, and looking more thoughtful and sedate than he had been wont to do when Alfred first came to Geneva.

"Who is doing these letters for the *Day*?" he asked after they had exchanged greetings. "Do you know, Delane?"

"Ask Balmaine here; I dare say he can tell you."

"Ah, that is it, is it? I thought I detected your style in that sentence about the self-seeking of the few, and the patriotism of the many. Very well put, I am sure. I congratulate you, Balmaine; you are an awfully lucky fellow."

Alfred thanked him; but there was a something

in Corfe's voice which made him suspect that his compliments were rather ironical than sincere.

Corfe, after lighting a cigar, read the article, but the perusal did not brighten his face much.

"Not bad," he observed, throwing down the paper "What with the handsome screw you get from the *Helvetic* and your outside earnings, you fellows must be making big piles. How much have you at Harman's, Balmaine?"

"Very little, I am sorry to say."

"And I have nothing," laughed Delane; "I make it a rule never to trust bankers with my money. I keep it in my pocket, and then I have no anxiety."

"You have no fear of losing it, you mean."

"Precisely, *mon ami*."

"Well," returned Corfe complacently, "I have a trifle at Harman's, something like—let me see—yes something like eight thousand francs, and I fancy it is a good deal safer where it is than it would be in my breeches pocket."

"Very likely, for if you had that much about you, you would be worth robbing, would he not, Balmaine?" said the Irishman with a laugh. "But you see I am never worth robbing; for if I get a hundred-franc note, and neither my landlady nor my tailor happens to want it, it burns a hole in my pocket double quick. If I were so awfully rich as to be worth eight thousand francs, I should probably

have more confidence in my banker than my breeches I like possession, though."

"So do I, and I can reduce my balance at Harman's to possession any day. I am going to draw some of it now for a trip to the other end of the lake."

"Are you going to be away long?"

"Oh, no; five or six days perhaps. I get so terribly low-spirited sometimes (sighing deeply), a change will perhaps do me good, and I shall try and look up a few advertisements for Mayo. Here's my copy, Balmaine" (throwing some manuscript on the table), "perhaps you or Delane will be good enough to read the proof for me."

"Certainly; and I trust you will have a pleasant trip, and come back in better spirits."

"Thanks awfully; ta-ta," and Corfe, rising from the table on which he had been sitting, walked slowly from the room. Since Esther's death he had tried to acquire a habit of slow walking. He thought it looked more seemly and subdued than his former rather swaggering gait.

"Corfe appears to like going to the other end of the lake," observed Balmaine carelessly, as he turned over the pages of the manuscript before him.

"Well, it's very nice up there—for a day or two; but awfully dull, I should think, for a long stay."

"I don't know, Delane. I fancy that what with fishing, boating, wild-fowl shooting, and moun-

taineering, I could pass a month or two very pleasantly in the region of the Waadtland Alps."

"You might perhaps; but I don't go in for that sort of thing. I like being where there is a crowd; solitude bores me. So it does Corfe, and that makes me wonder sometimes why he is so fond of Montreux and Clarens. However, there is no accounting for tastes. I see you are looking at his copy. Do you think it has been as good as usual lately?"

"Far from it, and I have hinted as much to Gibson. But the chief is too good-natured. He says we must bear with Corfe on account of his bereavement, and so everything he sends goes in."

"Do you approve of that?"

"No. I am sorry for Corfe; the loss of his wife was a great misfortune for him. But, after all, that is no reason why the paper should suffer. And he seems to be getting over his grief pretty fast."

"So if you were editor——"

"I should go through his copy with a wet pen."

"He would be awfully riled. He thinks his articles just perfection."

"I should do it all the same, Delane. An editor who passes people's copy for fear of riling them is not worth his salt."

CHAPTER IX.

CORFE ON THE QUEST.

WHEN Corfe started on his journey next morning a "black *bise*" was blowing—a fierce north-east wind with a cloudy sky. The sun was invisible; the mountains lowered swart and grim, and the snows on their summits seemed smudgy and grey. Clouds of dust swept along the white roads, the wind howled and shrieked up the narrower streets, doors and windows with a northern exposure were firmly fastened, and people who had occasion to cross the bridges and open places went with bent heads and turned-up collars, facing the gale as if they were fighting a foe. The lake was covered with *moutons blancs*—white sheep—which chased each other from side to side, dashed against quays and retaining-walls, splashed into roadways and froze where they fell. The trees lining the shore looked as if they grew icicles, and Genevan gardens were being rapidly converted into skating rinks.

Corfe was the only first-class passenger. Besides himself there were no more than half-a-dozen—all second-class people. He rather liked this. The

captain, who hesitated whether he should start, complimented him on his courage in venturing out in such weather. He had deck, cabin, and waiter all to himself, got a capital *second déjeuner*, talked largely to the master and the men of his experiences at sea, and could almost fancy that he was sailing in his own yacht. It was amusing, too, to watch the efforts of the steamer, in some instances ineffectual, to make fast to the landing-places of the little lake-side stations, and he enjoyed greatly the annoyance—generally expressed in volleys of *sacrés*—of the second-class passengers who were landed at one place when they wanted to get out at another.

Corfe's purpose on the present occasion was not precisely to propose to Mademoiselle Leonino. He wanted to break the ice, make her acquaintance, and, if possible, find out why this English heiress was being brought up as a Swiss peasant. More, it would be imprudent to attempt. It was only three months since the catastrophe at the Séracs du Géant, and he had an uneasy consciousness that he had not always played the part of a sorrowing widower with complete success. He liked billiards, and he liked baccarat, and at the Pension Ducrot and the Café Bellerive he had played very often—more than once all night. This, he was aware, did not look altogether *comme il faut*, and if it were to be known that he was looking after another wife

there would be unpleasant remarks—perhaps dangerous suspicions. He had not forgotten the parting observation of Madame Marcquart. In certain contingencies other people might take the same view of the matter. Not that he really cared for what people said (so, at least, he tried to think); proof was absolutely wanting, and mere talk could not hurt him. But talk might ruin his chances with Vera Leonino. He knew Swiss customs too well to suppose that he could marry her by a *coup de main*. He would have to negotiate with her adoptive parents, her *bonne*, or whoever her guardian might be. On them, much more than on the girl, would depend his chance of success. If he could bring them to consent, she would not be likely to object. But before consenting they would be sure to make inquiries, and if they should hear that he was suspected of——

“That would ruin everything,” he muttered. “I must keep myself in good odour and make no formal proposal for a couple of months or more. Confound it! But never mind; I have that money in the bank and a thousand francs in my pocket; I shall contrive to exist.”

And then he went to the weather side of the funnel, planted his back against a warm place, lighted another cigar, and watched the billows as they threw themselves against the rocky shore and tossed the boats that were not hauled in as if they

would break them into matchwood. Every two or three minutes the steamer shipped a sea, and the second-class passengers were having a bad time of it. They were both wet and sick.

"Poor devils!" he said. And the contrast between their misery and his comfort gave him an exquisite sense of enjoyment.

"It gets worse," he observed to the captain, looking to windward.

And it did. The Mont Blanc range was quite invisible; the Chablaisan Alps were half hidden under leaden clouds, which seemed hardly less storm-tossed than the lake itself, the snow was being whirled in mimic avalanches down the mountains, and the leafless trees that clothed their sides bent groaning to the blast. The water was white with foam, and save a large lateen-sailed boat, which seemed in imminent danger of foundering, not a craft could be seen.

"If I had not left Geneva I wouldn't have done," said the captain, scanning the horizon. "As likely as not this will be a six or nine days' *bise*, and until we get to the other end of the lake I shall not be able to land another passenger."

"I think the best thing I can do," returned Corfe, throwing the stump of his cigar into the lake, "is to go below and have a snooze until we get there."

When he came again on the deck an hour later

they were passing Vevey and nearly in sight of Chillon. Behind them the *bise* was still blowing, the lake still in commotion; but southward there reigned perfect peace. The lake stretched before them, calm and blue; a few billowy clouds fleeting past the face of the sun hardly obscured his brightness; and as they drifted away, and the ship got under the lee of the Waadtland Alps, it was as if she had sailed in a few minutes from howling winter into smiling spring. Many of the trees were in leaf, gardens were gay with flowers, and the pastures between the pine woods bright with verdure. This wondrous change of climate was due to the chain of mountains that shelters the upper end of the lake from the north and east winds.

Corfe made for the Rousseau. He had written to apprise Fastnacht of his coming, and was received by that gentleman cordially, yet with less effusiveness than on previous occasions. His manners were rather too free and easy for a guest who paid nothing. Corfe saw this at once, and by putting on an unusual graciousness of demeanour, and hinting that he was about to write an article for a London newspaper, in which he would say something pleasant about the Hôtel Rousseau, he soon regained the footing of a welcome guest.

It was only, however, after dinner, as they were sitting together in the manager's private room, that Corfe had an opportunity of fishing for information

about the heiress. He led the talk to M. Senarclens, which was not very difficult, the historian being one of the lions of the neighbourhood and a standing advertisement of its attractions.

"I suppose he is always working at his history?" asked Corfe.

"Always. From seven in the morning to eight in the evening—except when he eats, and takes a short walk in the afternoon. He often passes the Rousseau, sometimes drops in to look at the English papers."

"What volume is he on now?"

"I think it is the seventh, and he has eight more to do. They say it will occupy him still eight years."

"Very extreme in his opinions, isn't he?"

"Rather. A regular Red. Wants to abolish governments altogether, and give everything to everybody."

"Does he act up to his theories in private life?"

"I am not so sure about that. Perhaps he is waiting for the social revolution. But he is really very good—gives a great deal more than he spends I should think, and has what you call the courage of his convictions."

"And, I have no doubt, gets shamefully imposed upon. By the way, did you hear anything further about that peasant family he took such a fancy for?"

"A peasant family?"

"Yes; don't you remember? One of them was here at the *fête*—a rather nice-looking girl; my friend Balmaine danced with her. I forget her name just now. Wasn't it Paganini, or something like that?"

"You mean Mademoiselle Leonino. But that is not the name of the family she lives with. They are called Courbet, and live, I think, somewhere about La Boissière, not far from the Hôtel de la Fôret. You know the Hôtel de la Fôret, of course?"

"I have heard of it. It is only open in summer, I think?"

"Not generally. But this year it is; and I think Henri, that is the proprietor, has even some guests. Courbet is considered a good peasant—pretty well to do, you know—but I dare say stupid and avaricious, like most of his class. I don't suppose M. Senarclens cares anything about him. But he takes a warm interest in Mademoiselle Leonino—there is something in her history——"

"Ah, I think you told me. Her father died and left her in charge of her *bonne*, old Courbet's daughter."

"Precisely. And I fancy that M. Senarclens, notwithstanding his Socialistic notions, does not think that a peasant's house is exactly the place for such a girl, and Madame Senarclens often asks

her down to Bellerive. I saw her there only a few days ago."

"She is very fortunate in having such a friend," returned Corfe with a yawn. "I say, Fastnacht, I think I'll have a cup of *café noir*. That *bise* has made me confoundedly sleepy, and it is too soon to go to bed yet."

"Certainly, M. Corfe." And the manager summoned a waiter and gave the order, whereupon they glided into another subject of conversation.

At breakfast next morning Corfe announced that he was going to walk over the Dent du Jaman to Vevey, where he might probably pass the night. But when he was well out of sight of the Hôtel Rousseau he set his face towards the Hôtel de la Fôret, and after a two hours' tramp—sometimes following the road, which zigzagged ever upwards, sometimes taking short cuts between vineyards, through woods, and across pastures—he reached his destination, a long, low, picturesque wooden building, with a verandah and a terrace, commanding a magnificent prospect of the lake and the Alps. All around was white, and for the last half-hour Corfe had been walking over snow. His first proceeding was to get a good luncheon, his next to stroll round the hotel and ask a labourer, who was stacking firewood, the way to La Boissière. The man told him. Turn to the right after crossing the bridge higher up, then bear to the left about two kilometres off.

Not much of a place; only two or three châlets; no auberge. Did a family called Courbet live there? Yes; old Père Courbet—everybody knew old Père Courbet. His was the highest châlet and the biggest. And then the man, who was very sparing of his words, went on stacking his firewood.

In half an hour Corfe was at La Boissière, three wooden farm-houses, a quarter of a mile apart from each other. It was easy to recognise Père Courbet's châlet on the crest of the hill, backed by pine woods, and flanked by a grange and several minor buildings. A breezy place enough, and in summer doubtless very pleasant, but just now of somewhat bleak and wintry aspect.

Corfe walked to and fro and hung about the place a long time. He might have found a pretext for going into the house by making an inquiry about the way, or asking for a cup of milk; but that would not have suited his purpose. He wanted to get speech of Vera, and it was hardly possible that he should find her alone indoors. His only chance was to catch her outside. But in this he did not succeed, and late in the afternoon hied back to the Hôtel de la Fôret in a very bad temper, and spent the evening in a dimly-lighted and insufficiently warmed smoking-room, over an ancient copy of *Galignani* and a *Gazette de Lausanne*, which latter, though a good paper so far as it went, did not go very far, being only about the size of a lady's

pocket-handkerchief, and could be read, advertisements and all, in about five minutes.

The next day Corfe had better luck. After prowling about La Boissière an hour or more, he took a turn in the direction of the lake, then retraced his steps, and at a bend in the road where a mountain stream was crossed by a rude bridge of pine logs, he caught sight of a figure coming towards him, which made his heart give a sudden bound and himself for an instant stand stock still, like a pointer setting game.

Yes, there could be no doubt of it. It was she—the heroine of the ball and the unconscious heiress of fifty million francs. It made more of a mouthful in francs than in pounds sterling.

“And mighty well she looks,” was Corfe’s mental commentary. “Not a bit like a common peasant.”

It was quite true; for, albeit far from rich, Vera’s dress was tasteful and becoming. A turban-shaped hat, probably of her own making, trimmed with rabbit skin, a muff of the same material, a thick cloth jacket with bright steel buttons and white fur about the neck, and a stuff gown of silvery grey. The gown, well tucked up to keep it out of the snow, displays several inches of a striped red petticoat, shapely ankles, and a pair of well-formed feet, shod with stout mountain boots. The girl moves with a springy step; her dark eyes are bright

with gladness, for she delights in the open air, and the warm blood has transfused with crimson the rich olive of her cheeks.

As Corfe nears her he doffs his hat and makes a low bow. "I beg pardon, Mademoiselle," he says: "would you have the kindness to direct me to the Gorge des Châtaigniers?"

"Certainly, Monsieur," answers Vera drawing one hand from her muff. "You go up there until you come to a fountain, then you turn to the left until you come to a châlet, and then you will see a foot-path that leads to the gorge."

"A thousand thanks," returns Corfe as the girl essays to resume her walk. "I beg pardon again; but I think I have had the pleasure of meeting Mademoiselle before."

"I think you are mistaken, Monsieur. I do not remember you," says Vera coldly; and again she makes an effort to go on, for she has been bred in the belief that it is not *comme il faut* for a *jeune fille* to engage in solitary conversation with any man, above all a stranger.

But Corfe stands in the way.

"I remember you," he replies in his most gracious manner. "Nobody who has once seen Mademoiselle Leonino could possibly forget her. It was at the fête at the Hôtel Rousseau. You danced with an Englishman, M. Balmaine."

"But you are not M. Balmaine," she exclaims

sharply, surprised into an answer she did not intend to make.

"No; but he is my friend. I was with him. Your name is Italian, Mademoiselle Leonino. Are you of Italian origin? I once met a gentleman of that name at—where was it? Yes, at Lucca. Could he be a relation of yours?"

"Oh, perhaps it was——" and then remembering how extremely improper it is to continue talking with a strange gentleman *tête-à-tête*, she tries again to pass her questioner.

"I beg pardon a thousand times, Mademoiselle, but do, please, permit me one word more," urges Corfe, still barring the way. "You were saying——"

At this moment a dog bounds from the wood into the road, followed by a young fellow got up *à la chasseur* and with a fowling piece under his arm.

"Good day, Monsieur Jules," exclaims Vera, again moving forward. This time Corfe does not attempt to bar the way.

"Good day, Mademoiselle Leonino," answers the chasseur in a surprised voice and with a look that said as plainly as possible: "Who is that man there?"

"This gentleman wants to know the way to the Gorge des Châtaigniers. Perhaps you will be good enough to show him. *Au revoir*, Monsieur Jules," and without so much as looking at Corfe she drew herself up and struck sharply down the mountain.

"Perfectly," says M. Jules. "*Allons, Monsieur.* I will put you in the way. Does Monsieur know Mademoiselle Leonino?"

"Not precisely. I met her at the fête a little while ago—that is all. Does she live hereabouts?"

"Yes, at La Boissière, the large châlet up yonder."

"With her parents?"

"Not at all. Madame Gabrielle, that is Monsieur Courbet's daughter, is her *tutrice*. Her parents are dead, and Madame Gabrielle used to be her *bonne*."

"I see. Mademoiselle Leonino is pretty. Is she *fiancée*?"

"*Pas du tout*. She will have a nice *dot* though. There are many who would be glad to marry Mademoiselle Vera, very many. But Père Courbet declares there is nobody good enough for her, and that Mademoiselle desires not to marry herself. An old *grogard* and very avaricious. He has her money, and some people say that he does not want to fork out the *dot*."

"Is there a Madame Courbet?"

"No; she is dead since a long time. Madame Gabrielle manages the household of her father. But here we are at the fountain. Behold! you have only to go about three kilometres until you reach Monsieur Guyot's châlet, and you will see the gorge down below. If you follow the footpath through the wood it will take you to Chillon. *Au*

revoir, Monsieur. I go a-hunting higher up the mountain."

"*Au revoir, Monsieur.* A thousand thanks for your complaisance," answers Corfe, setting off in the direction indicated.

But when he was sure that the chasseur was out of sight he turned round and walked briskly towards La Boissière.

"Madame Gabrielle is nearly sure to be alone at this hour," he said to himself. "I must interview her. It is an opportunity not to be lost."

CHAPTER X.

FOUND OUT.

THE châlet of La Boissière was a somewhat ancient structure, dating from the last century, and built, as the pious text in German characters over the doorway betokened, when the lords of Berne ruled in Canton Vaud. The woodwork was stained and darkened by age and exposure; a long gallery, ornamented with trellis-work and quaint carvings, ran along the front of the edifice, and the roof was so high and pointed that the snow slipped off as fast as it fell.

Corfe knocked boldly, and either hearing somebody say "Entrez!" or fancying he did, opened the door and entered accordingly. He found himself in a large room with a high wooden ceiling, a bare oaken floor, and a big white stove. Ranged round the panelled walls were several settles and chairs, and a heavy table with carved legs occupied the centre of the apartment.

It was evidently the principal living room of the house, and Corfe could not help remarking the scrupulous cleanliness of everything. Not a speck of dust was to be seen.

Near the stove sat a woman knitting—a tall comely woman of some forty years old, for though her face bore traces of anxiety and care, her cheeks were ruddy and her dark hair was thick and glossy, and unstreaked with grey. A frank open face withal, indicative of a kind heart and a mild temper.

“I beg a thousand pardons,” said Corfe, in his most insinuating voice. “But do I speak to Madame Gabrielle Courbet?” (I had better plunge *in medias res* at once he thought.)

“At your service, Monsieur,” answered Gabrielle, looking all the surprise she felt.

“Ah! I wanted to ask you, if you will kindly permit me. . . . You are the *tutrice* of Mademoiselle Vera Leonino, I believe?”

“I have that honour,” returned Gabrielle, staring harder at her interlocutor than ever. “Her father on his death-bed gave Vera into my charge.”

“I knew him.”

“It is possible,” said Gabrielle, changing colour. “He was not always with us, and knew many people whom we never saw.”

“It was at Lucca I saw M. Leonino. Where did he die?”

“At Locarno.”

“How?”

“He died of wounds received in an affair with the Austrians,” answered Gabrielle, turning pale, “and

before he died he asked me to be a mother to Vera and bring her up in my own home. . . . and he gave me money. It was not much—just enough, with care, to bring her up as a demoiselle. And I have been very careful, Monsieur, and only the interest of the money has been spent, and Vera is to me as a daughter—she is the apple of my eye—she is dearer to me than my own, and she loves me, Monsieur; ask her. Oh, Monsieur, you will not take away from me *ma fille chérie*. You cannot be so cruel! I have—have——”

Here words failed her, and sinking into her chair the *bonne* burst into tears.

“I, my good woman! I have no power to take Vera away from you—at any rate, not now, What I do not understand is why Mr. Hardy—that was his real name, you know——”

Gabrielle looked assent.

“I do not understand, I say, why he chose to have his daughter brought up in a Swiss châlet when he might have sent her to his father in England. However, that is no affair of mine—at any rate not now. Many thanks for your information. *Au plaisir de vous revoir*, Madame Gabrielle.”

And Corfe bowed himself out of the châlet with as much politeness as if it had been a château and the *bonne* its châtelaine.

“That will do for to-day, I think,” he muttered, as he walked swiftly down the hill. “I will go

back to Geneva to-morrow, and do myself the pleasure of seeing Madame Gabrielle another day. It's all quite clear. She has been playing the thief—stolen both the girl and her money—that is what she has done. *Tant mieux*, gives me a splendid pull over her. Now I am sure of Vera and her millions and no mistake. Hurrah!”

And in his excitement, Corfe threw his stick high in the air, but caught it so clumsily that he got a smart knock on the nose, which set him swearing horribly.

“If it swells,” he thought, “I shall look so ridiculous.” It did swell, and was so much “barked” besides, that he had to repair damages with sticking plaister, and invent a story about a walk in the forest and a falling branch.

“My sin has found me out,” groaned Gabrielle, when she was left alone. “That man knows everything. I could see it in his manner, read it in his eye. He will come again; he will take my darling, *ma fille chérie*, away from me. And when she knows—when she knows that all this time I have deceived her, kept her in this poor house when she might have been in a palace—what will she say—oh, *mon dieu*, what will she say! She will despise me, she will leave me, she will say ‘Gabrielle, I hate you!’ Oh no, no, no, that would be more than I could bear. I would rather die. And my father, when they ask him for the money what will he say,

what will he do? Oh, *mon dieu! mon dieu!* that which I have feared all these years has come to pass. My sin has found me out. Yet I did it for the best—I did it for the best.”

The poor woman in her agony wrung her hands, her face was bedewed with bitter tears, and she rocked herself wildly to and fro. This went on for a whole hour, and might have gone on longer if the striking of a clock had not recalled her to herself, and warned her that it was time to prepare for the midday-meal. She ran to her own room, and when she came back in a more composed frame of mind, and with a face which, though pale, showed few traces of emotion, a stout kitchen wench was spreading a coarse cloth at one end of the big table. A few minutes later the girl brought in a soup tureen, and almost at the same instant entered Père Courbet, a tall old man, all bone and sinew, and with a long lean face, tanned by continual exposure to wind and sun to the colour and consistency of leather. Whiskers he had none, and his short white hair, which had been cut close to his head, stood up like bristles. A stern, silent man now, whatever he might have been in his youth. Without a word he placed himself at the head of the table, and a few minutes later they were joined by Jean, the *garçon*, a man nearly as old as his *patron*, and the only farm servant kept through the winter.

The repast was of Spartan simplicity. Soup à la *bataille*, a piece of cold boiled bacon and roasted potatoes, goat-milk cheese, and *pain de ménage à discrétion*. The loaf was a huge circular thing, as big and as hard as a wheelbarrow trundle. But the frugality in eating did not extend to drinking. Père Courbet drank a whole litre of *vin blanc*, Jean half a litre, but of inferior quality, and the coffee that succeeded the cheese was considerably diluted with cognac.

The wine and the cognac, and the sense of satisfaction produced by a plentiful meal, loosened the old peasant's tongue somewhat.

"Where is Mademoiselle to-day?" he asked.

"At M. Senarclens'."

"She will bring back books, or pictures, or something of that sort, I suppose."

"Very likely. She generally does."

"I do not believe in so many books. Mademoiselle reads too much. She would do better to milk the kine and help in the vineyards like other girls. Her fortune is not so great that she may not have to work for her living one of these days. If she marries a peasant she will have to work."

"I do not think——" and then Gabrielle stopped short.

"Perhaps you think a peasant is not good enough for her," said the old man scornfully. "Not that I want her to marry just now at all. But a girl does

far better to marry an honest peasant with a bit of land and a house he can call his own, than a *viveur* from the town, who is clad in purple and fine linen one day and in rags the next. And Mademoiselle would make a very poor peasant's wife I am thinking."

"You do Vera wrong, father. She has not an idle bone in her body. Didn't she help in the vineyard last vintage, and work in the hayfield last harvest, and doesn't she help me in the house? She is the best fine-darner in the commune, and when she can spare time she is always at her painting——"

"Painting!" interrupted the old man in a tone of contempt, "what good will painting do her? Send her to the wash-tub rather."

"No, indeed," returned Gabrielle indignantly, "I shall do nothing of the sort. I will not let her do coarse work. There is no reason why she should. Does she not pay us a pension?"

"Yes, twenty-five francs a week," returned Père Courbet bitterly.

"And quite enough too. It's more than she eats. The lodging costs you nothing."

"It might easily have been more. If it had been thirty or forty francs a week, how much less I should have to pay! Ten francs a week for ten years—that would be more than five thousand francs—the price of a nice bit of land. Besides, she

does not pay twenty-five francs ; she pays nothing. It all comes out of the interest I pay her on the loan—five per cent. It is a great deal too much.”

“You were glad enough to pay it once, father. You forget that Vera’s money saved you from ruin. What would you have done without it ? ”

“As for that, I cannot do without it now. I could not raise the money without selling some of my land—do you hear, Gabrielle ?—without selling some of my land. There must be no question of Mademoiselle marrying unless (with an incredulous laugh) you can persuade somebody to take her without dower. Monsieur Jules will not—of that you may be sure. And look here, Gabrielle, I must have thirty francs a week for pension, or the interest must be reduced to four per cent.—whichever you like. I give you notice from this day.”

Whereupon Père Courbet refilled and relighted his pipe, and stalked out of the house.

CHAPTER XI.

AT LA BOISSIÈRE.

“I SUPPOSE M. Lacroix has been at him again,” thought Gabrielle, as she returned to her knitting; “he is very wishful for his son Jules to marry Vera, and they are well off, and Jules is by no means an undesirable *parti*. But would Vera marry a peasant? I doubt it. She has her own ideas; she knows that in England girls make their own choice, and that M. Senarclens means to let his daughters make their own choice. Still, if she marries anybody, I should like it to be Jules, for then I should always have her near me, and that strange monsieur could not take her away. Who is he, I wonder, and how can he have found us out? He knew poor M. Leonino at Lucca, he said. It is true we were once at Lucca, but I do not remember the face, and if he had ever come to see Monsieur I should remember it—I never forget a face. Since I came here with Vera I have not seen one face I knew in Italy.”

And then Gabrielle went over in her mind for the hundredth time all the events connected with

the demise of Philip Hardy—the arrival of the wounded man at Locarno, his last instructions, his death and funeral, and her departure, as all thought, for London. But the letter she had received from her mother weighed heavily on her mind. It told that her people were in sore trouble. The father's soul was in the land. He worked harder than any labourer, and did more work than any two men in the commune. His only thought was to increase his patrimony. He bought every bit of meadow land and vineyard he could lay his hands on, mortgaging one purchase to pay for another. In his eagerness he committed a grave imprudence—raised a loan on the personal security of himself and a neighbour, the understanding being that they should divide the proceeds; but his fellow borrower contrived to get hold of the entire amount and before Courbet could make him disgorge the man failed. Then the family at La Boissière saw ruin staring them in the face. All their property being mortgaged, it was impossible to meet the claims upon them without making a forced sale of the whole of their land, leaving the house where Courbet's father and grandfather had lived and he himself was born, and starting the world afresh.

These were the tidings that Gabrielle received the day after her late master's funeral. They nearly broke her heart, and her grief was all the

keener that she felt so utterly powerless to help her parents in their need. What could her poor savings do towards providing the thirty or forty thousand francs—an enormous sum in peasant estimation—required by her father to save him from ruin?

“Forty thousand francs,” she repeated to herself, as the diligence lumbered up the Val de Tremola. “forty thousand francs! why, I have nearly as much in my possession. Why should I not lend it to them?”

It was the first time the idea had occurred to her, and she strove to put it away; but it returned again and again, and the more she thought of it the more feasible and less objectionable did it seem. Against any ordinary temptation the *bonne* would have been proof, but this she was powerless to withstand—it took her on her weakest side—and before the diligence reached Goeschenen she had decided on her course of action. Instead of going to London she would go to La Boissière. It would be easy to account for her appearance there by saying that M. Leonino had left Vera in her charge, and given her a large sum of money, the interest of which would be sufficient to defray the cost of the child’s maintenance and education, and that she was to be brought up in Switzerland—living and education being so much less expensive in that country than

in England. Then she would propose to lend her father the money entrusted to her by her master.

In this Gabrielle persuaded herself there would be nothing very wrong. She did not mean to take the child's money; she would account for every centime, charging nothing for her own services, and when Vera reached womanhood restore the girl's fortune intact. Vera had never seen her grandfather, and had no desire to see him. Now that her father was gone there was nobody in the world she cared for but her *bonne*, and life on the mountains of Canton Vaud was infinitely preferable to life in the fogs of London, for Gabrielle of course believed that the English capital was shrouded in perpetual gloom. She did not think that she ran much risk of being traced or followed. M. Hardy *père* knew not that his son was dead; Martino and the others at Locarno thought she was gone to London; and up there in the mountains it was to the last degree improbable that she would meet anybody who had known either the child or her father.

Altogether Gabrielle felt quite safe, and when she told her story at La Boissière, and produced the thirty-two thousand francs she had brought with her, there was an outburst of joy that obliterated from her mind the last traces of hesitancy or compunction. An act which caused so much satisfac-

tion, and saved an honest family from ruin, could not be wrong.

"You have saved my life and your father's honour!" exclaimed Madame Courbet, as she clasped her daughter in her arms. "If we had been sold up it would have killed me."

Père Courbet was not an emotional man; but when he saw the money counted out on the table he wept tears of gladness.

"God bless thee! my child," he said, fervently; "I can keep the land and the old place now—all but the strip of pasture below the pine wood, and if I had not promised it to Lacroix I would keep that too, although he does pay me a good price for it, and I bought it cheap."

Neither Courbet nor his wife would hear of anything being paid for Vera's board. She was their good angel, they said—she had brought them luck; and as for her keep, why that would amount to nothing at all. The child was welcome to the best they could give. So Gabrielle was able to save nearly the whole of the interest paid by her father towards the expense of Vera's education, and after they had been at La Boissière a twelvemonth, she sent the girl to an excellent school at Vevey. But nearly every Sunday and fête day the *bonne* walked down the mountain to visit her ward, and Vera spent her holidays at La Boissière.

For several years all went well, but Madame

Courbet's death, an event which occurred when Vera was about fourteen, wrought a great change at La Boissière. She never forgot how much they owed to Gabrielle, nor the consideration due to Vera ; she always made much of the child, and her influence kept in check the natural greed of her husband's disposition. But when she was gone, and as the years went by, the old man forgot the benefit and remembered only the burden and the obligation. The thirty odd thousand francs he owed Vera, and the consciousness that they would some day have to be repaid, weighed heavily on his mind, and if the interest had been composed of drops of his own blood he could not have begrudged it more. He insisted on Vera paying for her board and lodging, demanded a more rigid economy in the household, grumbled at every little expense, and often made both his daughter and Vera weep bitter tears. It was then that Gabrielle began to have doubts as to the wisdom of the course she had adopted ; to ask herself whether she had acted rightly in disobeying her master's instructions, and if she had not done Vera a great wrong in bringing her to La Boissière instead of taking her to London. The superior education she had given the girl made it all the worse. The chalet, with its sordid economies and her father's uncertain temper, was no place for a girl like Vera. And what was to become of her ? The only alternative was to marry her. But to whom ? Jules

Lacroix was a *bonne garçon*, and Gabrielle liked him; but she did not like the idea of marrying her child, of whose acquirements and accomplishments she was so proud, to a peasant, even if the child would consent, which was very doubtful. But if that stranger should come again and try to take Vera away, she might make the attempt. Anything would be better than to lose her.

But as Gabrielle got over her first surprise, the danger from that quarter seemed less formidable than at the first blush it had appeared. The gentleman did not say that he was a kinsman of Vera. He had only known M. Leonino at Lucca. What right then had he to interfere? Who knew what had passed between her master and herself, or could say that in coming to Switzerland she had not obeyed his orders? The sole evidence against her was the letter to his father (an old man who was surely dead by this time), and that she had hidden in her box up-stairs and could easily destroy.

On the whole, Gabrielle, albeit still conscience-stricken and uneasy, felt more reassured, and when Vera returned, late in the afternoon, she was able to greet her with a cheerful smile.

"I don't like your going out alone," she said, as the girl stooped to kiss her. "It does not seem *comme il faut*. A demoiselle like you should not go so far without escort. But you would not like

old Jean or Georgette (the kitchen wench) even if they could be spared, and I cannot always go with you."

"No, indeed," answered Vera with a merry laugh. "Fancy old Jean hobbling behind me in his big *sabots*! and as for Georgette, it is I who would have to take care of her. She is afraid of her own shadow. Don't you remember sending her to meet me one evening last winter when I was rather late, how I hid behind a tree and called out, Boo—oo! and how poor Georgette ran home so fast that I could not overtake her."

"Yes, I remember very well, *la pauvre Georgette*," said Gabrielle, laughing in return. "Well, I don't think there is much danger; our mountains are quite safe, and everybody in these parts knows you."

"Quite so. It is not as if we were in a large town. But do you know, *chère Gabrielle*, that I met with an adventure to-day? A gentleman accosted me."

"*Ma foi*, you don't say so! Who was he?"

"That I cannot tell you. I never saw him before. He began by asking me the way to the Gorge des Châtaigniers; but I have thought since that it was only an excuse to get speech of me. Then, when I had shown him the way, he said he had seen me before—at the fête of the Hôtel de Rousseau."

"It was not the Englishman with whom you danced? How does he call himself? Monsieur Balmaine?"

"Not at all," answered Vera, rather more impetuously than she need have done. "Do you think I should not recognise a monsieur with whom I danced three times? No, this gentleman is not at all like M. Balmaine. I am not even sure that he is English; his accent, which was very slight, seemed rather Italian. He asked me if I was not Italian, and said he once knew somebody called Leonino at Lucca. I was going to ask for further particulars thinking it might be my father he had met, when I remembered that I was *en tête-à-tête* with a strange gentleman, and at the same moment M. Jules appeared with his dog, and I went my way."

"You did quite right, *ma chère*. What was he like, this gentleman?"

"Rather tall and square-shouldered. A very good profile, straight nose and wide nostrils; mouth so covered with a heavy moustache that I could not see its expression, very square jaws and shaven cheeks. But I did not like his eyes, they are too small, and his under-eyelids being swollen, they seem even smaller than they really are, which gives him a bad look. At least it seemed so to me, though I dare say there are people who might consider him a fine-looking man."

"You are a close observer, *ma petite*."

"That is because I paint. Lucie Senarclens and I are doing portraits at present, and that makes me study faces, you know."

"What makes you think this gentleman asked the way to the Gorge des Châtaigniers only as a pretext?" asked the *bonne*, with as much indifference as she could assume, for the meeting of Vera with the stranger appeared of evil omen and disturbed her much.

"Because when I pointed out the way he did not seem to pay attention, and though he was profusely polite, his manner or his voice—I really cannot tell which—did not impress me as that of a sincere man. I wonder whether he really did know my poor father, Gabrielle?"

"I am afraid that was only another pretext, Vera."

"I should think so too if he had not mentioned Lucca; how could he know we were ever at Lucca?"

"That is impossible to say. He may have heard from somebody, or it may have been just a happy guess."

"It's very strange though. I wonder who he could be?"

The *bonne* was wondering equally, but wanting the subject to drop she made no reply.

"Gabrielle!" said Vera, after a long pause passed in deep thought.

"Yes, Mademoiselle."

"You did not know my mother?"

"No, I became your *bonne* only after she died, when you were about four years old."

"Poor mother!" said Vera, with a look of abstraction. "I only just remember her. Still I can see her face and hear her soft voice as she said *carissima mia*. But my father, I remember him so well, Gabrielle, so well, and all that happened in those terrible days at Locarno, and how I nestled in his arms, and how he loved me. And I loved him, Gabrielle. I love him still. Oh! it was cruel to lose so kind a father. How I hate those Austrians! I could——" Here the girl made a gesture as if she were striking down an imaginary foe—"I could kill them. You are quite sure, Gabrielle, that my father had no kinsfolk in England?"

"Only your grandfather, and he died, you know."

"It seems very strange. M. Senarclens was saying to-day that he thinks we should find I have relatives in England if proper inquiry were made. I should like to go to England, Gabrielle. It is my country, yet I have never seen it."

"No; Italy is your country, *ma chère*."

"Not at all" (with great decision). "My father

was English, and M. Senarclens says the nationality of the child is that of the father. I should like to know something about my mother's family, if it were possible."

"I am more ignorant about your mother's family than your father's," said Gabrielle, as if she were growing rather tired of the subject. "I know only that she died when you were very young, and that her name was Leonino."

"I think I shall abandon that name, Gabrielle, and call myself for the future Vera Hardy."

"But why?" exclaimed the *bonne*, with inward tremor though outward calm. "Your father called himself by that name; why should not you?"

"He had good reasons, no doubt; but it seems to me that a daughter should bear her father's name."

"But think, Vera, how inconvenient it would be. You have been so long known as Leonino. Who put the idea into your head, *ma chère*?"

"It is my own idea, though I did hear Lucie one day remark that it was strange I should be called by my mother's name. That set me thinking, and now it seems strange to me. Why did my father take my mother's name?"

"To deceive the Austrians, I suppose."

"Exactly. Well, I don't want to deceive the Austrians. I would rather defy them. Vera Leonino Hardy is my name, Gabrielle, and after my next

birthday I shall ask everybody so to call me. I am an English girl, and I hate to be taken always for an Italian."

As Vera spoke a heavy footstep was heard in the yard, and a moment afterwards Père Courbet entered the house.

"Have you two nothing better to do than chatter?" he asked, with a snarl.

Then the two knew that he had been drinking. Not that the old man ever got drunk, but when he had been taking more wine or cognac than usual—and he usually took a good deal—his temper worsened, and he sometimes became very abusive.

Vera, fearing a scene, withdrew to her own room without answering a word. She was beginning utterly to detest M. Courbet, and notwithstanding her affection for her *bonne*, had sometimes serious thoughts of seeking fresh quarters. The contrast between the refined home of her friends at Territet and her own, already sufficiently painful, was rendered by the old peasant's rudeness and ill-temper almost intolerable. But out of consideration for Gabrielle she had hitherto kept these thoughts to herself; and the *bonne*, albeit she doubtless guessed them, saw no way of making a change that would not separate her from Vera.

The girl's questions and remarks about her father and her name greatly distressed Gabrielle. Vera

had never talked in the same strain before, and the *bonne* almost regretted that she had always been so frank in giving her information, and had let her know, among other things, that her father's name was Hardy. In her present temper this knowledge might lead to awkward complications.

CHAPTER XII.

A CATASTROPHE.

ABOUT the same time that Corfe hit himself on the nose with his own stick, the sub-editors of the *Helvetic News*, by a not very singular coincidence, chanced to be all at their posts. Milnthorpe was hard at work with scissors and paste, Delane making up a column of "Continental Notes," and Balmaine looking over his last leader, and trying to think of a subject for his next.

"The paper has still a good show of advertisements," he observed carelessly, "though it is the dead season."

"Of course it has," returned Delane, with a laugh; "why shouldn't it?"

"I suppose you mean they are not all genuine."

"I should think not, indeed. Why Coxwell told me so only yesterday."

"Hush!" put in Milnthorpe, who was better at listening than talking; "isn't that Gibson's step on the stairs?"

"Nonsense!" answered Delane; "he never comes at this time."

But Delane was mistaken, for the next moment the editor-in-chief entered the room.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said to his three subordinates, who at his approach had resumed their work.

They all turned round and looked at him, for he spoke with a half gasp, half stammer, in marked contrast with his usual hearty greeting. One glance was enough to show that something had gone wrong. The editor's face was pale and twitched, and though the day was cold, heavy beads of perspiration stood on his brow.

"Have you heard? — do you know?" he gasped.

"We have heard nothing particular this morning; what is it, Mr. Gibson?" asked Balmaine anxiously.

"Harman's have burst, and—and—I have nearly £400 in their hands."

The three subs stared first at him and then at each other. They could hardly believe they heard aright; and the same thought struck them all—that either the chief had been drinking or gone off his head.

"I came round by the bank to cash a cheque," he went on with a little more self-possession, "and got there just as they closed the doors. Something wrong in New York; the houses there and in London suspended payment yesterday, and the

house here was of course obliged to follow suit. There will be a terrible row; a crowd before the door already. I ran on here at once. It is an awful blow for me, but that is not the worst. I fear it will stop the paper. Everybody knows that Harman was its chief support; and now, instead of getting more money, Leyland and Mayo will have to pay up."

"Have you seen Mayo?" asked Balmaine.

"No; somebody was with him. He has heard though. I am going again now, for I must see him. I shall return presently, and tell you what is going to be done."

"Well, this is a go!" exclaimed Delane, when they were left alone. "I don't know how it will be with you fellows, but I am in a nice hole; I am that."

"I thought you kept all your money in your breeches-pocket," said Balmaine.

"So I do, and here it is; all that I have (displaying a couple of napoleons and some silver), "and all that I shall get if the paper stops—not enough to carry me to England. I was paid up on Saturday. How is it with you, Balmaine?"

"Bad enough if the paper stops. I have eight hundred francs at Harman's and fifty in my pocket. But will the paper stop?"

"I doubt it. Anyhow, Leyland and Mayo will meet the occasion if anybody can. They have

immense energy and few scruples, I will say that for them."

"If the paper should stop will you let me be your banker?" put in Milnthorpe quietly.

The others thought he was joking; their taciturn colleague being the last man in the world whom they would have suspected of being a capitalist.

"I have been saving for an object," continued Milnthorpe; "but I have neither kept my savings in my breeches-pocket nor deposited them at Harman's. Pockets have holes sometimes, and I have heard that pretty nearly every American banker fails sooner or later, and generally sooner than later. No. I put my money in the Banque Populaire, an excellent institution which gives better interest than the other banks, and is quite as safe. I have no present occasion for money, and if you will permit me shall be very glad to accommodate you with a few hundred francs."

Delane and Balmaine exchanged significant looks. How they had mistaken this man! They had thought him poor, miserly, and unsympathetic, and now he was proving to be that *rara avis*, a generous capitalist and a true friend in need.

"You are a good fellow, Milnthorpe," said the Irishman, "and I thank you with all my heart. If the paper does burst up I will certainly take advantage of your kindness. You shall lend me as much as will pay my travelling ex-

penses to London ; when I get there I shall be all right."

"And you, Balmaine?" asked Milnthorpe.

"You are really too kind," said Alfred, "and, like Delane, I thank you with all my heart. If I should have occasion I will not fail to ask you for a temporary loan. But if the worst comes to the worst—which is contrary both to my hopes and my expectations—I think I shall have as much coming from the *Day* as will keep me here a little while, and, if necessary, carry me to England."

"Well, whenever you want a little money you have only to mention it, you know," returned Milnthorpe, who seemed disappointed that neither of his friends would oblige him by accepting an immediate loan.

Half-an-hour later Gibson returned with the news that the paper was going on.

"Mayo was terribly upset at first," he said, "as might be expected; but he very soon rallied, and has no idea whatever of stopping. It is true they owe the bank a thumping sum, which they can no more pay than they can fly; but as Mayo says, liquidators are never hard on their debtors; and as it will take a long while to wind up so big a business as Harman's, they will have plenty of time to turn round in. But until Leyland comes—and he has been telegraphed for—nothing final will be decided."

"Except to carry on the paper," put in Delane.

"Of course. Except to carry on the paper—'that goes without saying.' Mayo is fully determined on that point. He says that rather than stop it he would rob a church."

"I believe him," said Delane dryly.

"And Mayo seems to think," went on the editor, that it won't be such a bad affair, after all. Here, at least, Harmans have made no losses; and the estate ought to yield a very fair dividend—probably seventy or eighty per cent.

"Seventy or eighty per cent.," observed Milnthorpe quietly, "means something like fifteen shillings in the pound, and fifteen shillings in the pound is an almost unheard-of dividend. An estate that pays that much must be virtually solvent, for the wreckers—lawyers, accountants and the rest—are not often satisfied with a fourth. If Harmans owed me anything and I was offered fifty per cent., I should take it and be thankful."

"No, no, Mr. Milnthorpe," returned Gibson, with a touch of scorn in his voice. "You mean well, I dare say, and seem to know a good deal about these things; but I must have more than fifty per cent., my dear sir. If I don't, I shall lose £200 of hard-earned money. I am going to see Harman, and I shall insist on having, at least,

seventy-five per cent. Even that would involve the sacrifice of £100."

"As if by insisting one could get blood out of a stone!" said Milnthorpe, with a quiet laugh, as Gibson left the room. "Why doesn't he insist on a hundred per cent. while he is about it?"

"You do not think very highly of his chance of getting seventy-five per cent., then?" asked Delane.

"I don't. I shall be surprised if Harman's estate pays ten per cent."

"In that case I may look on my unfortunate thirty pounds as practically lost," said Balmaine, with a sigh. "But about the paper; do you think it can go on?"

"That depends on whether Mayo and Leyland can raise enough money from week to week to pay current expenses—wages and suchlike—until they are able to arrange some new combination, obtain a loan, take in a partner, or find a buyer with more money than brains."

"You seem to know a good deal about these things, as Gibson just now observed. Have you been in business yourself, Milnthorpe?"

"Unfortunately I have."

"Why unfortunately?"

"For a good many reasons. Perhaps I may tell you one of these days. Meanwhile, let me give you

a bit of advice. It often happens just after a failure, that some fellow with more faith than experience, offers to buy up claims. If anybody makes you an offer, take it, whatever it may be."

CHAPTER XIII.

CORFE IN A CORNER.

LATER in the day Gibson came back greatly lifted up, and with an unmistakable "didn't-I-tell-you-so" look on his face."

"I have had a long talk with Harman," he said, rather largely; "and it is quite as I expected. He is very much cut up, poor fellow, very much; but full of confidence. Showed me a telegram from New York; the third since last night. The house is quite solvent, and the suspension arises solely from a temporary lock-up of funds. So soon as they realise their securities they will pay everybody in full and resume business."

"And when does Mr. Harman expect that will be?" asked Balmaine, with a side glance at Milnthorpe.

"Well, I did put the question to him, but he could not exactly say. You cannot always put a date to these things, you know; but if you asked my private opinion I should say in about three months. At any rate, it won't be long; and I feel quite sure now of getting every shilling of my £400. Little thinks so and he ought to know."

“Harman’s particular friend you mean?”

“Yes, Rickarby A. Little, from New York, said to be a double millionaire—in dollars. I’ll tell you what he said, and he has the courage of his opinion. ‘I am a large creditor of Harman Brothers,’ he said, ‘both here and in New York, but I feel just as sure of getting my money as if it were in your Bank of England. And I am quite prepared to buy any of the firm’s debts at fifty per cent.—cash down and no questions asked.’”

“Considering Mr. Rickarby A. Little feels so cock sure of getting paid in full, that seems rather a low figure, doesn’t it?” asked Milnthorpe.

“Just what I observed,” returned the editor; “and he answered me with that directness which is so admirable a feature of the American character. ‘I do not pretend to do business for nothing,’ he said. ‘If I buy up claims on this estate I mean to make a profit, and if people don’t like to deal they need not—that is all.’”

“Did you accept his offer?” inquired Balmaine.

“Certainly not,” replied Gibson warmly. “Mr. Little is a very smart man, I dare say; but an old bird is not to be caught with chaff. No, Balmaine, I would not take ninety per cent. for my claim; and if you take any less for yours you will be very foolish.”

“Perhaps,” said Alfred; “but I am not quite so sanguine about the result as you are. I want

money, too, and if so small a claim as mine is not beneath his notice, I would let Mr. Rickarby have it on his own terms."

"I'll tell you what," returned Gibson briskly, seeing, as he thought, a chance of turning an honest penny, "I'll buy it from you myself. At the same time, I tell you frankly I think you are doing wrong."

"I dare say I am. All the same, as Mr. Little would say, I am ready to deal. A bird in the hand—you know."

"As you like. How much is it?"

"The exact amount," said Alfred, referring to his memorandum-book, "is 918 francs."

"Then I must give you 459 francs. All right. I will bring you the money in the morning. I am going below to tell Mayo what I have heard. I shall be back presently."

"You managed that very well, Balmaine," said Milnthorpe with an approving smile.

"You think I have done right, then?" returned Alfred dubiously, as if he were not quite sure about it.

"I have not a doubt about it; and as for Mr. Little, I am not at all sure that, if he were put to the test, he would buy claims at fifty per cent. or any other discount."

"Why should he say so, then?"

"Bounce, my dear fellow, bounce. An American

is a born bouncer, just as an Italian is a born liar. Talking tall comes natural to him, just as skinning flints comes natural to a Scotchman and overreaching to a Jew. I am only surprised that anybody born in such a big country as America should own to the name of Little.

“You are in a cynical mood, Milnthorpe. Have you been in America?”

“I have—to my sorrow! But of that another time. Jud will be here in five minutes for copy, and I have not done a stroke of work the last two hours, or more.” And as he spoke Milnthorpe seized his scissors, and cut viciously into the *American Eagle*.

On the following afternoon Corfe appeared at the office. He had heard the news, of course. Nobody could be half an hour in Geneva without hearing it—highly embellished. He was wild with rage, and in his excitement quite forgot that he had to pose as a disconsolate widower.

“It’s a regular swindle!” he said furiously, “and when I get hold of Harman he will pass the *mauvais quart d’heure de Rabelais*. I can promise him that. Why, to hear him and that head bottle-washer of his talk—confound them both for a pair of arrant knaves—and see the army of clerks they kept, and the bundles of bank-notes that were always knocking about the place, you would have thought the firm as rich as Rothschilds! I did,

and a darned fool I was. Seven thousand francs clean gone! I'd like to roast Robert Harman before a slow fire, or draw him a tooth every day until he pays up! These tales about tremendous losses in New York, a lock-up of funds, and all that, are all nonsense. It's downright, deliberate robbery—a plot to swindle their creditors. Does anybody know if there is any likelihood of there being any sort of dividend?"

"I suppose so," said Balmaine, coolly, for Corfe's hectoring manner pleased him as little as the violence of his language. "Gibson thinks it possible that the house may pay in full and resume business. Milnthorpe thinks they will pay next to nothing. For my part, I don't believe that anybody, not even Robert Harman, knows anything about it."

"That is likely enough. But I am of Milnthorpe's opinion. I don't think there will be a centime for anybody."

"You had better see Little," suggested Delane, who wanted to get rid of him. And then he mentioned the American's offer to Gibson.

"I'll see him at once," said Corfe. "I think he is at the Belle Vue. Fifty per cent.! Yes, I'll take fifty per cent. I only hope Mr. Little has not changed his mind."

But Mr. Little had changed his mind. At any rate, he would not bite, though Corfe tried him

very hard. He did not deny having offered Gibson fifty per cent., but since the day before he had bought several claims on Harman's estate. His firm in New York had also operated largely, and for the moment he did not feel disposed to go farther. All the same, he had not the least doubt that the estate would turn out well, and if Mr. Corfe would only have patience, he was sure to get all his money.

"I wish I was," muttered Corfe, as he turned on his heel, without so much as saying good-morning. "He knows a d—d sight better. If he thought so he would buy; and he won't give even a thousand francs. Well, there is only one thing for it; I must force the running with little Leonino. It is a risk, but the risk must be run; but if I have only half-luck, I do not see how I can fail this time. The *bonne* is evidently guilty; I can make her do whatever I want, while as for the girl, she is just at the age when any sort of nonsense will go down, and if I know anything, it is how to make love. I ought to do, I have had plenty of practice."

CHAPTER XIV.

A SMART MOVE.

At the office of the *Helvetic News*, as at most newspaper offices, salaries were paid weekly. Every Saturday morning Gibson went downstairs, drew enough money to pay himself and his staff, and then handed to each man his due. On the Saturday succeeding Harman's suspension he returned from this usually pleasant mission with a very long face.

"You will have to put up with short commons this week, gentlemen," he said. "Mayo has not yet succeeded in making fresh banking arrangements, and can only give us half-pay; the balance must stand over until next week. The clerks below are being treated in the same fashion; only the compositors are getting paid in full."

"Let us be thankful for small mercies," said Milnthorpe, pocketing his money. "This is twice as much as I expected."

On the following Saturday Gibson returned from his wonted interview with the cashier with a longer face than ever.

"I have nothing at all for you to-day," he said dolefully. "It has been a hard struggle to pay the compositors; there is not a centime for anybody else. I am very sorry; but what can I do? And I don't know what will be the end of it, either."

Balmaine felt glad that he had sold his claim on Harman's estate, but Gibson felt far from glad that he had bought it. The prospect of a favourable dividend was decidedly worsening. At the first meeting of creditors some very damaging disclosures had been made. Mr. Rickarby A. Little turned out to be a big creditor, fully secured. He had been lending the defunct firm money at usurious interest. Corfe made a violent speech against both him and the debtors, and threatened to have Harman prosecuted as a fraudulent bankrupt. All this put the editor very much about. He felt that he should never be able to forgive himself for not accepting Little's offer on the nail; and when on the next pay-day there was again no money in the big safe—not even for the compositors—he quite lost his temper, fell out with Mayo, and gave that astute gentleman the opening for which he had long been waiting.

"You say you won't stand it," said the manager sneeringly. "Leave it then. You can go whenever you like."

"Pay me my arrears of salary, then, and an indemnity of ten thousand francs for breaking my

contract, and I will go at once," replied Gibson hotly.

"No, Mr. Gibson, I shall not pay you a centime for breaking your contract. I said just now that you might go whenever you liked. I say now that you must go when I like, and that is to-day. You cease from this moment to be editor of the *Helvetic News*, Mr. Gibson."

"You forget, I think, that my engagement does not terminate for eighteen months," replied the editor, with forced calmness. "I will go, certainly, if you wish it; but as you put it in that way I demand seventy-five weeks' salary at 300 francs a week. That makes—let me see—22,500 francs. Are you prepared to give me 22,500 francs?"

"No; nor 22,500 centimes. You shall have the arrears of your salary—I will send you a cheque next week—and that is all you will get."

"Then I shall sue you," said Gibson, turning pale. "I will make you pay."

"Try, by all means, if you think you can get anything," returned Mayo coolly. "All the same, you will make a great mistake. It does not seem to occur to you that you have broken your contract pretty nearly every week for the last five or six months, and that you have not a leg to stand on."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. You undertook to edit this paper and write the leaders, didn't you?"

"Certainly."

"Have you done so?"

"Of course I have."

"Not you. You have left it all to your assistants. You seldom appear at the office before 6 P.M.—generally not until seven—and you often leave before nine. There are weeks (referring to a diary) when you have written but one leader—one week you wrote none; for the last three months your average has been two."

"I never undertook to write every leader. It is quite sufficient if I give instructions and see them written, and, in short, take the entire responsibility of the *rédaction*."

"I don't think so. You surely don't suppose that it ever entered into our calculations to pay a man like you 300 francs a week merely to give instructions? We can do that ourselves, Mr. Gibson. However, as you say you are going to sue us, and the affair in that case will have to be discussed in another place, I don't see that anything is to be gained by bandying words; and with your leave I will go upstairs and tell Balmaine and the others what has happened."

"I shall go with you and take away my private papers," said Gibson, bottling up his indignation, though with difficulty.

"As you will. If we have to fight, we may as well fight like gentlemen. I shall say no more

than is necessary, and nothing that need give you offence."

They found all the sub-editors in their room, waiting to be paid.

"You will be surprised at what I have to tell you," said Mayo quietly. "Mr. Gibson and I have had a slight difference of opinion, and he has dissolved his connection with the paper."

"It is true," added the ex-editor, with assumed indifference, "although it would perhaps be more correct to say that my connection with the paper has been dissolved. However, it comes to the same thing. I am going, and I confess that I am very sorry to part with you, gentlemen. We have always got along very well together, and though our official relations have ceased, I trust our friendship will continue."

"I am very sorry," said Balmaine, taking his proffered hand, "and very much surprised. So far as it depends on me, our friendship will not be in the least diminished."

The others expressed themselves to the same effect, for all liked Gibson. Even his besetting sin of indolence, though not without drawbacks, had left them far more liberty than they would have enjoyed under a less easy-going chief.

"I am glad to hear you say so," returned Gibson, with feeling. "I suppose we shall see each other now and then, and I should not be surprised if we

were all to meet in London on some not very distant day. If we do, I will ask you to dine with me at the Savage. *Au revoir.*"

"I know what that means," said Mayo, with rather a forced laugh; "it's a parting kick. He thinks the paper is going to pot, and that in a week or two you will all be in London looking for berths. But he was never more mistaken in his life. Will you step this way a moment, Balmaine (going towards the editor's room)? I want to speak to you."

When they were alone the manager explained to Alfred that Gibson, having resigned his post for reasons to which it was not necessary "further to allude," he should be glad if Balmaine would take his place. He had watched him, read his articles (which were always excellent), and felt certain that he would make a most efficient editor-in-chief. For the present he could not offer him more than 150 francs a week; but when they had succeeded in reorganizing the finances of the paper they would "make it two hundred."

To such a proposal there could, of course, be only one answer, for though the editorship might add somewhat to Balmaine's responsibilities, it would add little to his work, much to his power, and the increased salary would be highly acceptable.

The next thing was to tell Delane and Milnthorpe. This Mayo did in a very few words; and,

after expressing a hope that they would pull well together, was making off in a hurry, when an observation from Milnthorpe, though not ostensibly addressed to him, "pulled him up sharp."

"Had you not better go downstairs for our salaries, Mr. Balmaine?" said the junior sub with the gravest of faces. "I don't suppose Mr. Gibson got the money, or he would have paid us."

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," said Mayo, wheeling round and turning red, "I ought to have told you. The fact is—the fact is—there is nothing in the safe; but I have paid the compositor's in full and last week's arrears, so the paper is safe. But I am in treaty for a new banking account, and Mr. Leyland has gone to London to see what he can do there; and I have no doubt that next week I shall be able to pay you in full. I can sympathise with you, for I am as hard up as anybody. I have not drawn a centime since Harman's stopped."

"It's all very fine," grumbled Delane when the manager had disappeared, which he did without pausing for a reply, "but if Mayo has drawn nothing since the suspension, he took deuced good care to feather his nest before. I vote we do as the compositors have done."

"What have they done?" inquired Milnthorpe.

"They threatened to strike if they were not paid up, and, as you hear, he has paid them."

"And makes a virtue of it. Mr. Mayo is cer-

tainly a very clever man. I do believe he will keep the ship off the breakers after all. It's a very smart move, too, getting rid of Gibson. How much are you to have, Balmaine, if it's a fair question?"

Balmaine told him.

"The arrangement does the manager infinite credit. He saves half Gibson's salary and all yours—225 francs a week in all. But what I cannot understand is how he has managed to get rid of Gibson. However, I offer you my sincere congratulations on your promotion, Balmaine—I beg your pardon, Mr. Balmaine."

"No, no," exclaimed Balmaine, "Alfred, an you love me!"

"By all means," said Delane; "but are we not going to celebrate your promotion in some way? I should like to drink your health, though the times are so hard and we so hard up."

"Certainly," answered Balmaine, "we will have a *déjeûner à la fourchette* at the Café du Roi. *Allons.*"

"With all my heart," said the Irishman gleefully. "I am awfully peckish, also very thirsty. You will stand a bottle of cham., won't you, old man?"

"That requires some consideration, Delane. Champagne is expensive, and money scarce; and Mayo's promises, I fear, are not much to be depended upon. What do you think, Milnthorpe?"

"Mayo is a gentleman of infinite resources and

few scruples ; and until he and Leyland succeed in hitting on some new device for raising the wind you may be sure they will not pay a centime more than they can help."

"In that case," said Balmaine ruefully, "I do not think it would be prudent to go beyond a bottle of Swiss. Will that do, Delane?"

"Do? Of course it will. I always go in for *vin du pays* on principle. It is more likely to be genuine than the imported article, to say nothing of its being so much cheaper. Besides, Swiss champagne is really very good."

So to the Café du Roi they went, and Balmaine ordered a modest *déjeuner* of three courses — *bouillon*, *vol au vent*, and *baignées de pommes* — rounded off with the *champagne Suisse* so much desired by Delane.

The café consisted of a large room and a small one, each with plate glass windows, looking towards the lake ; and though the day was yet young several groups of card players were already at work, and the click of billiard balls could be heard in the next apartment.

"By Jove! look there!" exclaimed Delane excitedly, "that's Count Solferino. He gambles here all day long, and sometimes all night. They say he eats his cigars, and I do believe he is at it now."

The man pointed out by Delane was a stout,

white-faced, black-haired personage, with a bit of red ribbon in one of his button-holes. He sat at a side table with three other men, all deeply interested in a game of baccarat. At the moment, when the Irishman called attention to him, Count Solferino was in the act of putting into his mouth a cigar of the sort known as a "Vevey," about the thickness of a little finger and some six inches long. He then made as if he would light it, but did not. A minute later the cigar began to grow perceptibly shorter.

"He is eating it," whispered Delane.

And so he was; the cigar grew shorter and shorter, and finally disappeared.

"Horrible!" said Balmaine. "It looks like a snake creeping down his throat. Does he always consume his cigars that way?"

"No, I believe he sometimes smokes 'em. But they say he eats 'em without knowing it; gets so absorbed in the game that he forgets everything else, and cannot even taste strong tobacco like that."

"I can well believe it. I mean there is no stupidity, or folly, or crime of which a gambler is not capable," said Milnthorpe gravely. "I could tell——"

"Hullo! here you are, all together; the top of the morning to you."

The speaker was Corfe. They had been so

intent upon watching Count Solferino eat his strange meal that they had not seen their *confrère* enter the café.

"You are feasting," he went on, after they had answered his greeting. "That means there is money at the office, I suppose? Very glad to hear it. When I have had a drop of absinthe—*pour m'éclaircir*, you know—I shall just see what they can do for me."

"You may save yourself the trouble," laughed Delane.

"You don't mean to say they have not paid you?" said Corfe, with a significant glance at the bottle of champagne.

"I mean nothing else; but that is no reason, you know, why Balmaine should not pay his footing, and we rejoice in his promotion."

"How—what promotion?"

"*Rédacteur-en-chef*, vice Gibson resigned."

"Nonsense, you are joking."

"We were never more serious in our lives, were we, Milnthorpe?"

Whereupon the latter confirmed the statement, and told in more detail what had come to pass.

"I congratulate you, Balmaine," said Corfe; and, if you will allow me, I shall drink your health."

This was done; and a few minutes afterwards Corfe, muttering something about an engagement elsewhere, left the café.

"He does not seem to like it much," said Delane; "you saw the scowl that passed over his face when I told him?"

"Why?" asked Balmaine; "he and I have always been good friends. He can have nothing against me."

"That has nothing to do with it," said Milnthorpe. "There are people in the world who are never more vexed than when they hear of a friend's good fortune. Perhaps Corfe is one of them."

Milnthorpe was right. It was not in Corfe's nature to regard another's advancement with satisfaction, and as he had always counted on being Gibson's successor, he looked upon Balmaine's promotion as a personal wrong done to himself.

"It's just like my rotten luck," he thought as he walked over the bridge. "The idea of making a greenhorn like Balmaine editor of a paper! He wants the shine taken out of him, and if he does not mind what he is about I'll make Geneva too hot to hold him."

CHAPTER XV.

TEMPTER AND TEMPTED.

GABRIELLE COURBET was in a fair way to recovery from the shock occasioned by Corfe's unwelcome visit, and had almost persuaded herself that her alarms were imaginary, when she received a letter thus couched :—

“The gentleman who had the pleasure of calling upon Madame Courbet a short time ago, for the purpose of making inquiries about Mademoiselle Leonino (otherwise Hardy), will be at the entrance to the Gorge des Châtaigniers on Thursday next, at three o'clock in the afternoon, where he hopes to have the advantage of seeing Madame Courbet a second time, with the object of making a communication of great importance, closely affecting her own interest and the happiness of her ward.”

This missive brought back the *bonne's* fears in full force, and she spent the interval between its receipt and the time appointed for the interview in an agony of suspense and apprehension. What

could it mean? How much did the man know? It was in vain she argued that her secret was confined to herself and to the packet which, as she had only the day before convinced herself, was still, with seal unbroken, where she had laid it ten years before. Facts were against her. This stranger did know something, knew a good deal, or he could not have spoken and written as he had done. How he had got to know was a detail of trifling importance. She felt that she was in his power, and that her peasant's wit was no match for his trained intelligence. Had she dared she would fain have shirked the meeting.

Gabrielle reached the rendezvous several minutes before the appointed time, and punctually, at three o'clock, she was joined by Corfe.

"*Bon soir*, Madame Courbet," he said. "I presume my letter surprised you somewhat?"

Gabrielle, it is hardly necessary to say, was unmarried, but it is a Swiss custom to address women of a certain age as "*Madame*," in token of respect.

"It did, indeed, Monsieur, and I still feel quite at a loss to know why——"

"I asked you to do me the favour of coming here. I will tell you. It is about your charming ward, Mademoiselle Vera Leonino, otherwise Hardy."

"Yes, sir; what about her?" said Gabrielle, almost faint with apprehension, although Corfe's manner was affable in the extreme. He had made

up his mind that mildness of speech would suit his purpose better than the reverse—unless she should prove restive, and then he would have to try rougher methods.

“I love Vera! I have loved her ever since I first set eyes on her at the fête. I want to marry her.”

“Marry her!” interrupted Gabrielle, hardly able to believe the evidence of her senses. “Marry her!”

It seemed scarcely credible that this man, whom her imagination had invested with so many terrors, should after all be only a wooer.

“Yes, marry her; why not? Is there anything wonderful in the fact that an English gentleman of means and position should desire to marry a beautiful, well-educated girl, whose father was also an English gentleman? Yes, I want to marry her, and I mean to marry her, with your kind aid, Madame Gabrielle, and then” (lowering his voice to a significant whisper) “I will keep silence about—that money you took.”

“Oh, Monsieur, you do me wrong!” exclaimed the *bonne* in great agitation. “The money—I took it—I mean I took it not, it is intact. I can account for every centime. The capital is in the hands of my father, and the interest, it has been spent on Vera.”

“All the same, you took it, Madame Gabrielle—

you took your master's money, and that is what the law calls by a very ugly name. However, I am sure you meant well, and have done your best for Vera. You may trust fully to my discretion, and as for money, I have ample means of my own. Let your father keep Vera's. If it is quite convenient he may pay some small acknowledgment in the shape of interest. But if you give me Vera, I care for little else—I am dying for love of her."

"Ah, Monsieur!" said the *bonne* in a voice trembling with emotion, "when you ask for Vera you ask for my life. I have brought her up; she is to me as my own child."

Notwithstanding her emotion, Gabrielle felt greatly relieved. This monsieur, so much dreaded, was not wicked, after all. He had the air of a well-bred gentleman, and with his means and position might make Vera a most suitable husband; but the idea of the child being taken away from her—probably to a foreign land—was more than she could bear.

"And she shall remain your child. Do you think I could have the cruelty to separate you? You shall live with us, and be her *femme de chambre*."

"I am very grateful, Monsieur, for your kindness," said Gabrielle, joyfully, "and I think I may say I will do my best to forward Monsieur's views.

But there is one consideration Monsier is forgetting."

"What is that, *mon amie*?" asked Corfe, with a pleasant smile.

"Suppose Vera is not willing?"

"A well-educated young girl does as she is told in these matters, and you and your father, who desire only her happiness, will tell her that Vernon Corfe, who has served in the English army, who is one of the editors of the *Helvetic News* of Geneva, and the correspondent of a great journal of London, is in every respect an unexceptionable *parti*."

"But, Monsieur, Vera has not been educated like a young girl of the *bourgeoisie*. She has had much more liberty; she has read English books, she knows that English girls choose themselves their own husbands, and my father and I, we have not over her the authority of parents."

"That is nothing at all, my dear Madame Gabrielle," said Corfe with an air of easy assurance. "Support my suit, speak in my favour—that is all I ask; I will answer for the rest. May I depend on you?"

"Perfectly, Monsieur," answered the *bonne*, now completely reassured.

It was then arranged that Corfe should follow her to the chalet and introduce himself as a friend of Vera's father, and that so soon after his departure as Gabrielle might deem it expedient she should

inform the girl of the object of his visit, and urge her to accept his offer.

This scheme was duly carried into effect, and, as it happened, Corfe arrived at the chalet before Vera's return from Territet, whither she went two or three times a week. This so far served his purpose that when Vera appeared on the scene the *bonne* was able to spare him the awkwardness of introducing himself.

"This is M. Corfe, my dear," she said in answer to the girl's look of surprise, "the gentleman you met the other day. He was slightly acquainted with your dear father, and also knew the family of your mother."

In point of fact he knew neither the one nor the other; but being aware that when her father died she was no more than seven years old, and having gathered from Gabrielle that Vera only just remembered her mother, and some other particulars, he played his cards so adroitly that the *bonne* doubted nothing, and her ward fully believed all he said. He also took care to say more about places than persons, and as he knew Italy well he could do this without difficulty. Corfe, having so much at stake, naturally exerted his power of pleasing to the utmost, and interested Vera so greatly that she set him down in her mind as being—next to M. Senarclens—the cleverest man she had ever met. He knew so many languages, could tell so many amusing

stories, and seemed to have travelled nearly all over the world. Even the brag and bounce in which he could not help indulging answered his purpose, for the *bonne*, besides being as credulous as the average of her sex, had an interest in believing him, and it had not occurred to Vera that an English gentleman could possibly speak anything but the truth. The impression he made, as he could not fail to see, was decidedly favourable, and he went away fully satisfied with himself, and more confident of success than ever.

"I am staying at the Hotel de la Foret," he said on taking his leave, "and shall do myself the pleasure of calling again—perhaps to-morrow, or, at any rate, the day after."

"We shall be happy to see Monsieur at any time," returned Gabrielle, "and I am sure that my father, who has gone into Canton Valais to buy cattle, would be glad to make his acquaintance."

"And I am sure I should be equally delighted, Madame Gabrielle. *Bon soir*, Mademoiselle Leonino."

Vera returned his greeting and proffered him her hand, which Corfe held for a moment and eyed her with a furtive yet bold look of admiration; a mistake that went far to undo the effect of his entertaining conversation, for his eyes were his worst feature, and the glance, besides annoying her, rekindled that vague feeling of mistrust

and aversion with which their first interview had inspired her.

"A very nice gentleman, is he not?" said Gabrielle, as soon as he was gone.

"Yes," acquiesced Vera, but in a tone which implied that she was not quite sure about it, "and very clever. He must have seen a great deal. But I don't like his eyes, Gabrielle, nor the way he uses them."

"What is the matter with his eyes? I saw nothing wrong about them."

"That is because you are not an artist, Gabrielle. I study eyes; they are the windows of the soul. An otherwise good face may be spoiled by bad eyes, but with beautiful eyes no countenance can be ugly. Look at those fine pictures of Glaire in the Musée of Lausanne and you will understand what I mean. This gentleman—M. Corfe, does he not call himself?—has a good profile and what I should call a strong face, but his eyes have a sinister expression and in my opinion quite spoil him. Compare them with the eyes of M. Senarcens or of that other Englishman."

"What other Englishman?"

"The one with whom I danced at the fête—M. Balmaine. Yes; his eyes are not only bright and intelligent, they inspire confidence, and M. Corfe's do not."

"You are unjust, Vera. M. Corfe is a true

English gentleman," protested the *bonne* with some warmth.

"I dare say he is, Gabrielle, and I am sure he is very clever, but he is not to be compared with my father, who, besides M. Balmaine, is the only Englishman to whom, until I met M. Corfe, I ever spoke."

"There are very few like your father, Vera, yet I believe that M. Corfe is an honourable gentleman, and also very rich and distinguished."

To this remark Vera made no answer; she seemed buried in the thoughts which the mention of her father had suggested, and Gabrielle concluded, perhaps wisely, that the moment was not propitious for broaching the subject of Corfe's intentions; but she made no secret of them with her father; when he returned in the evening she told him all that had come to pass.

The old man was greatly pleased.

"Take her without a *dot* will he, and accept any interest for the money I may find it convenient to pay! He must be a fool. However, that is no affair of mine. Let him have her by all means. You said so, of course."

"Naturally; but I have not yet spoken to Vera."

"What does that matter?" said Père Courbet, with a brutal laugh, "girls must do as they are told. I won't have any *bêtises*, Gabrielle."

"You forget, father, that we are not Vera's

parents and cannot force her into a marriage against her will, and to try to do so would make a scandal. What would M. Senarclens say? What would M. Lacroix say? You must leave it in my hands, father. I will arrange it. If you meddle you will do harm."

The *bonne* spoke firmly, for she was conscious that her father's advocacy would be fatal to Corfe's pretensions.

"Very well, do as you will," he growled. "Only it must be done, mind. I will have no *bêtises*."

Corfe came again next day and had a friendly chat with the old man, who received him with great effusion and treated him with the utmost respect. He had also another talk with Vera and Gabrielle, and though he found no opportunity of speaking to the latter privately a significant side look told him that she had not yet spoken to Mademoiselle Leonino of the matter he had most at heart. But it did not suit him to remain long in suspense, and as he took his leave he mentioned, with a glance at Gabrielle which she quite understood, that he should do himself the pleasure of calling on the morrow.

"He will come again to-morrow!" said Vera, when she and the *bonne* were alone. "He seems very fond of La Boissière. Why will he call again to-morrow?"

"Cannot you guess?"

“No; I am at a loss to understand why a man of the world like this M. Corfe should care for our society, and his reminiscences of my parents do not seem to amount to much, after all.”

“It is not for our society he cares, Vera; it is for yours.”

“Mine! What do you mean, Gabrielle?”

“What I say. Do you think M. Corfe comes here to see a middle-aged woman like me, or an old man like my father? Not he, indeed. You are the attraction. He comes to see you, child, and I really think you ought to be proud of the conquest you have made.”

“Impossible, Gabrielle; I don’t believe it,” exclaimed Vera passionately, after a long pause. “You are mistaken.”

“No, I am not; and to speak frankly he has asked our permission to pay you his court, and my father and I, we both think you would do well to accept him.”

“It was all a pretence then, his coming here to talk about my parents. I do not want to marry—but (bitterly), perhaps you want to get rid of me, Gabrielle. I know your father does.”

“Get rid of you, my darling!” exclaimed the *bonne* vehemently. “It is because I do not want to lose you that I am anxious for you to marry this M. Corfe. He is rich, he is distinguished, he is good. He would let me be always with you. I

should still be your *bonne* and your *femme de chambre*. And consider, *ma fille chérie*, you are now nearly a woman. In a few days you will be eighteen. You cannot always remain here. La Boissière is no place for a *demoiselle* like you. And my father—well, since my poor mother died he has not been the same. He had never a very good temper, and now he is sometimes almost insufferable. It is very unpleasant for you; for me it is more than unpleasant, because I know that you are patient under great provocation only for my sake. Now if you marry M. Corfe all will be for the best. You will have a beautiful house. You will travel, you will see the world. You will visit Italy, Rome, Florence and other famous cities, and the picture galleries you want so much to see. And he loves you so much, *ce pauvre monsieur*. It is for your own happiness that I ask you to give him a favourable answer. It will be favourable, will it not, *ma chère* ? ”

“ I do not want to marry, Gabrielle—and—and I do not care for this man. He is old and he has bad eyes.”

“ Old ! Why he is quite young for a man. Not more than thirty I should say, while as for his eyes, I see nothing bad in them. And if they are not so beautiful as you would like, that does not make him a bad man. We cannot all have eyes like M. SenarcLens or this M. Balmaine. Let me tell him that he may hope, *ma petite*.”

Again Vera answered in the negative, but her

“No” was a shade less resolute than before, and it was easy to see that Gabrielle’s arguments had not been altogether in vain. The prospect of being her own mistress, of escaping from old Courbet, and, above all, of seeing Italy once more and revisiting scenes hallowed by the memory of her father and mother, were contending in her mind with her indisposition to marry, and her indifference to the man who wanted to make her his wife.

If she could have got over her dislike of Corfe’s eyes she might have inclined a favourable ear to his suit, but when Gabrielle put the question to her again on the following day she refused.

“Will you let me speak to M. Senarclens then, and be guided by his advice?” proposed the *bonne* as a last resource.

“If you like. I am not sure about following his advice; but I should certainly be greatly influenced by it.” Vera thought by this answer to spare herself further importunity. She knew M. Senarclens’ ideas about marriage and felt sure that he would not urge her to accept a man whom she could not like. Gabrielle, on the other hand, looked upon it as a virtual consent, for the girl had an immense respect for M. Senarclens, and she had no more doubt that the great historian—being a sensible man—would take her view of the matter, than that her ward would do as he advised. In this sense she spoke to Corfe when he called again on the follow-

ing day. Vera having gone to Territet they could converse freely. Corfe seemed annoyed.

"Why is she not here?" he asked. "Why will you not let me see her *en tete-à-tete*?"

"So I would, with pleasure, but she will not; and really, you know, it would not be quite *comme il faut*."

"Hang *comme il faut*! What is to be done then?"

"We must see M. SenarcLens. I will meet you at his house to-morrow."

"I really do not see what he has to do with the matter. But if there is nothing else for it, I suppose it must be as you say," said Corfe discontentedly. He was not at all satisfied with the turn things were taking. The historian might not be so easy to talk over as the *bonne*. "How did she become acquainted with M. SenarcLens?"

"My father lets him one of the *châlets*, and he and his family spend part of the summer there. He thinks all the world of Vera. She takes painting lessons with his own daughters; he says that she is a born artist, and with proper instruction might make herself a name."

"He says so, does he? My wife, Madame Gabrielle, will not need to paint pictures for her living. Ah, that reminds me. You have surely papers about Vera, papers you found among her father's effects or that he gave you? Where are they?"

This was spoken suddenly and sternly, and Corfe

saw by the *bonne's* hesitation and confusion that his surmise—for it was no more than a surmise—was well founded.

“Now look here, Madame Gabrielle, my silence and your good name, your freedom even, depend upon your unquestioning obedience to my orders. Fetch me those papers at once.”

The *bonne* not only felt that she was in this man's power; but that her will was weaker than his. She dared not disobey him; and though fully conscious that this further betrayal of her trust was an aggravation of her original offence, she fetched the packet confided to her by Philip Hardy and handed it to Corfe.

“Is this all?” he asked, putting it in his pocket.

“It is all,” she answered in a troubled voice.

“Good. It is a thing agreed then, that we meet to-morrow at M. SenarcLens'. At what hour?”

“Eleven o'clock.”

“I shall be there;” and without another word he stalked out of the *châlet*.

“Addressed to his father,” he muttered, looking at the packet as he walked down the path. “Unless I'm mistaken there is matter here that will prove useful to me in any event, besides strengthening my hold over Madame Gabrielle.”

This time, at least, Corfe was not mistaken, except in the sense that he had drawn a bigger prize than he yet knew.

CHAPTER XVI.

NEWS AT LAST.

“At last,” exclaimed Balmaine, as he saw lying on his desk at the office of the *Helvetic News*, a letter bearing an Italian post-mark and addressed in the handwriting of Colonel Bevis. “News about Martino it must be. Bevis can have nothing else to write to me about.”

Balmaine was quite right. The letter did bring news about Martino. He was back from Algeria. Bevis had seen him. “*As I expected,*” wrote the old soldier, “*Martino knew your friend quite well, and seemed much distressed when I told him the child was missing. He is coming with me to Geneva, and will give you all particulars. Till then adieu. Yours to command, Mark Bevis.*”

“Confound his brevity,” thought Alfred, “Why couldn’t he have given me some particulars? He is as sparing of words as if they were gold pieces. And when is he coming? I must find out.”

On this he shouted down the spout into the office below and asked the clerk who answered him to inquire of Mr. Mayo when Colonel Bevis was expected.

"Very soon," was the reply. "He is already *en route*; but the Colonel's movements are always uncertain, and it is impossible to say exactly when he will be here."

Mayo did not add that Bevis would have been at Geneva already if he could have sent him sooner the thousand francs, which the Colonel always insisted on having before starting on a professional journey. For the long-promised financial reorganization of the paper was still unaccomplished and the big safe as empty as ever. But it had the excellent quality of stability, it was always there, and no creditor could contemplate its imposing bulk, its brazen adornments and many locks, without feeling reassured as to the solvency of his debtors and the ultimate liquidation of his claim, even though he might court an interview with the cashier in vain. There were creditors who had come to the conclusion that the important functionary in question possessed the gift of rendering himself invisible at will, as, though his existence was a notorious fact, he was never to be seen by duns. Call when they would he was sure to be out, and however long they waited he failed to return. They knew not that the ingenious Mr. Mayo had organized a service of three small, yet sharp-eyed and quick-witted boys, who watched in the street, and whenever they saw anyone approaching that looked like a creditor, whistled the information to

the guardian of the big safe, whereupon that gentleman made himself incontinently scarce and came not back until the coast was clear.

Nobody proceeded to extremities, because the manager being plausible in speech and profuse in promises, generally succeeded in persuading importunate creditors that if they would only have patience all would be well. When they threatened, he just shrugged his shoulders and told them plainly that, if they proceeded to extremities, they would stop the paper, and so destroy the sole asset, except the types and the printing machine, which would not fetch enough to cover the cost of liquidation—and get nothing at all.

As for the editorial staff, beyond a few trifling sums on account, they had received no pay since the bank broke; and had it not been for Alfred's contributions to the *Day* he would have had to go on short commons. It was all he could do to keep straight with his landlady, and he was running behind with his remittances to Cora and his mother. Delane's pockets were as empty as the big safe, and Milnthorpe's balance at the Banque Populaire had sunk almost to zero. They lived like anchorites; not one of them had been in a café for a month or more, and they were reduced to smoking short *grandsons* at five a penny. But though hard up they were by no means low-spirited. There is a humorous side to everything, and this Delane was

always quick to seize and make the most of; while the very uncertainty of the paper's future and their own increased the piquancy of their position and added to the interest of their lives, for the dull monotony of prosperous times is often as irksome to youth as it is always grateful to age.

But to return to Balmaine. His first proceeding, after reading Bevis's curt epistle, was to write to Warton; the lawyer's clerk was growing very importunate for news—he had even hinted that Alfred was not using due diligence in his quest, and this gleam of light, so long waited for, might serve both to encourage him and, may be, to diminish the frequency of his letters, which were beginning to be rather a bore. This done, he took up some copy of Corfe's, and was going through it "with a wet pen" when after a knock at the door (Alfred now occupied the room vacated by Gibson), Delane popped his head into the room and inquired if he would receive M. Senarclens.

"Certainly; show him in," said Alfred, wondering what could have procured him the honour of a call from so distinguished a visitor.

The historian, though a great man, was short of stature and of insignificant bodily presence. But he had something better than long legs or stalwart arms—a superb head and an intellectual face. The long hair of sable silver was brushed back from a forehead both broad and high; his bright and

somewhat dreamy blue eyes fully justified Vera's admiration of their beauty, and though he wore a moustache and his chin was covered with a pointed beard, you could see that his shapely Grecian nose was matched by a firm and well-formed mouth, and his smile, as he advanced to greet Balmaine, was gracious and winning.

"I am sorry to intrude upon you," he said, taking the chair offered him by Alfred, "since editors are always busy men; but I shall not take many minutes of your time. My object is to ask you, in confidence, a few questions about M. Corfe—not, I assure you, out of idle curiosity, but for a motive that concerns closely one in whose welfare I take a deep interest. He occupies a position on the *Helvetic News*, I believe?"

"He contributes a weekly article, if you can call that occupying a position."

"It certainly can be called a position," said M. Senarcens, smiling, "although I imagined it was a much more important one. Do you know, are you at liberty to say, whether he has any other sources of income? The question is a somewhat delicate one, but I feel myself bound to put it."

"He does something for a London paper, I believe, and gives lessons."

"Has he property?"

"That I am unable to tell you."

"But he is the son of a military officer, and has himself served in the English army."

"I believe so; but you should know that my acquaintance with M. Corfe is very short. I have been only a short time in Geneva, and can really tell you very little about him."

"But so far as your knowledge goes, he is an honourable man, whose statements about himself may be trusted?"

"Certainly," said Alfred; "for if I know little about him, I know nothing against him, and he is undoubtedly a very able man."

"Thank you, M. Balmaine. That is all, I think. I daresay you are wondering why I have come to ask these questions about your *confrère*?"

It was true; Alfred was wondering very much.

"Well, I will tell you," continued M. Senarclens, after a short pause. "It is only right you should know. M. Corfe has made an offer of marriage to a young girl who is hardly less dear to me than one of my own daughters."

Alfred gave a start of surprise.

"Her friends, who are very simple, unsophisticated people, have consulted me about it, and I thought it my duty, before giving an opinion, to make some inquiry touching M. Corfe's character and antecedents."

"And the young lady?"

"She protests that she does not want to marry;

but that, you know (smiling), we must take *cum grano*; and her *tutrice* is strongly of opinion—and I am disposed to agree with her—that, seeing how she is circumstanced, it would be well for her to have the protection of a husband. *Parbleu*, now I think of it, you know her! You danced with her at the *fête*.”

“Mademoiselle Leonino?”

“Yes; Mademoiselle Leonino.”

For a moment Alfred felt as if the room were going round with him. He had just said that he *knew* nothing against Corfe; but he had never liked him; and when he called to mind the strange incident of Mrs. Corfe’s arrival at Geneva, her dreadful death, and his (as it would now seem) hypocritical sorrow, and many other circumstances, the idea of his marrying that sweet girl, who had made so strong an impression on Alfred’s imagination, if not on his heart, stirred him as he had never been stirred before. And it was he who had been the means of making known her existence to Corfe! What a treacherous knave the fellow must be! He could scarcely contain himself for rage.

“You seem surprised,” said M. SenarcLens, after pausing several minutes for a reply.

“I am. I admit it,” said Alfred recovering himself with an effort. “It seems only the other day that M. Corfe’s wife died, and now he is seeking another!”

“You don’t mean that he is a widower?”

“Certainly he is. Did you not hear of a lady being killed on the *mer de glace* at Chamouni a few months ago?”

“Yes, I read an account of it in the *Gazette de Lausanne*. She was German, was she not?”

“No, English, and M. Corfe’s wife.”

“How terrible!” exclaimed the historian, surprised in his turn. “The *Gazette* gave the name as Dorf, that is why I thought she was German. Strange that M. Corfe did not tell us this!”

“Very strange. Perhaps he feared that if made known to Mademoiselle Leonino it might prejudice him in her opinion.”

“Probably. And, so far as I can judge, he is really very much in love with her. Well, I don’t know of any law against a man marrying a second time; but it would certainly have looked better if he had mentioned the fact when he made his proposals. But he may have reasons for his reticence we know nothing of. I never condemn a man until he has been heard in his defence. I am also bound to say that M. Corfe spoke very nicely, and he really seems very much in love with Vera. And when a man does something which we are unable to approve we cannot deal too tenderly with him, M. Balmaine. Our impulses, when left to themselves, are all good; the bad are made vicious solely by unrighteous laws and an imperfect social

organization. Were there no moral codes there would be no sinners; and if the possession of private property were made a penal offence dishonesty would disappear, and thieves cease to exist."

Balmaine, who was too much troubled with what he had just heard to enter on the discussion to which M. Senarclens invited him, made a somewhat vague reply, and the historian, after observing that he would communicate the result of his inquiries to Mademoiselle Leonino, and confer with her *tutrice* as to the answer to be given to M. Corfe, took his leave, not, however, before he had thanked Alfred for his courtesy, and asked him to pay him a visit at Territet.

"He thinks we cannot deal too tenderly with Corfe," mused Balmaine. "Why, hanging is too good for the fellow! He must have taken a fancy to Mademoiselle Leonino when we went to the Rousseau together, at the very time he was posing as a bachelor, and his wife was in England. There is a mystery about that too—the affair was never properly cleared up—and now I think of it, his explanations were singularly evasive. And how sorry he pretended to be when she died! I am afraid Corfe is a very bad fellow—no fit husband for a sweet girl like Mademoiselle Leonino, and I'll take good care he does not marry her!"

But when Balmaine grew cooler, and thought the

matter out, he had to confess that he saw no practicable way of hindering the execution of Corfe's design—provided all the parties concerned were willing. If, after what he had told SenarcLens, Corfe did not receive his *cong  *, what could he do more? But surely no good girl would consent to marry a man she did not love, who had wooed her on the very morrow of the terrible event which bereft him of a wife to whom he had pretended to be passionately devoted. And her reluctance to marry showed that she did not love him. She was just being pushed into it by her friends. He must do something, that was quite clear; but what?

After cogitating a long time, without coming to any satisfactory conclusion, Balmaine lighted a *grandson*, went into the sub-editors' room and told them of Corfe's intended marriage. They were very much surprised, but took the affair much more coolly than he had done.

"I knew Corfe was an unaccountable sort of chap, but I had no idea he was so fond of the sex as to marry at the rate of two wives a year," said Delane. "Poor Mrs. Corfe! It does seem an awful shame for him to be after marrying another woman so soon after her death, and such a death!"

"Has this girl money?" asked Milnthorpe.

"I don't know; but I should think not."

"You may depend upon it she has, or Corfe would not be in such a hurry to marry her."

"I am not so sure about that," put in Delane thoughtfully. "When a fellow is in love, you know, he does not think much about anything else."

"The person Corfe is most in love with is himself," said Milnthorpe, "and I am sure that if he marries it is because marriage will somehow or other advance his interests, for, largely as he talks, you may depend upon it that he is very hard up."

"Still, I don't see," returned Balmaine doubtfully, "I don't see how Mademoiselle Leonino can have money. She lives up in the mountains, and I gathered from Senarclens that her people were of humble rank. As for Corfe——"

If Balmaine had completed the sentence—which he did not—he would have said that any man might well want to marry Mademoiselle Leonino, even if she had not a penny.

"As for Corfe,' you were saying," observed Delane, seeing that Alfred did not go on.

"Was I?" said Alfred with a look of surprise. "Oh, yes; I was going to say that we have seen very little of him lately."

"You have riled him; that's the reason why."

"By editing his articles, I suppose."

"Exactly. I met him the other day in the Place Neuve, and he asked me who had been playing old gooseberry with his copy again. I told him nobody touched it but you. He did not

say much ; but you should have seen his look ! I am afraid you have made an enemy of him, Balmaine."

"Never mind," answered Alfred carelessly. "I am not afraid of Vernon Corfe. Let him do his worst."

CHAPTER XVII.

RAISING THE WIND.

A WEEK later came Bevis.

“How do you do, M. Balmaine?” he said, as he entered the editor’s private room. “I congratulate you on becoming *rédacteur-en-chef*, and on the great improvement you have effected in the paper. It is just what it ought to be, lively and interesting, and full of Swiss news, and your leaders are crisp and short.”

Alfred thanked him for his compliments.

“You got my letter?”

“I did; and——”

“You mean Martino,” said the Colonel, with a look of importance. “It is all right. I have got him with me. But I thought it better not to bring him here: private business, you know; and the others might be wondering what it was all about. Nothing like keeping these things quiet. When will you see him? Can you be at liberty about six o’clock?”

“Yes; say from six to eight.”

“Good. Then we will dine at the Croix. A

table apart, you know, so that we can talk freely. Will that suit you ? ”

“ Exactly.”

“ Good ; we shall be there. Six o’clock sharp, remember. And now I must just run round the town to pick up a few renewals. I have done very well so far ; just given M. Mayo orders for six thousand. *A bientôt*, M. Balmaine.”

And the Colonel (who, though he spoke no language well but his own, always said “ Monsieur,” never “ Mister ”), bustled out of the room.

Punctually at the time appointed Alfred entered the *salle-à-manger* of the Hotel de la Croix. Bevis and Martino were sitting at a little table well out of earshot of the great body of diners. The Colonel introduced the strangers with a good deal of ceremony ; and Balmaine and the Italian, after bowing profoundly, assured each other how delighted they were to make each other’s acquaintance.

“ You knew Mr. Philip Hardy, I believe ? ” said Alfred, taking the third seat at the little table.

“ I knew him well,” answered Martino gravely ; “ we were engaged in the same cause, and he died in my house. He was a noble fellow.”

“ He is dead, then ? ”

“ Too surely. I saw him laid in the ground. You will find a tombstone inscribed with his name in the cemetery of Locarno.”

"And the daughter. What became of her?"

"What became of her? Why, she went to England with her Swiss *bonne*, Gabrielle Courbet."

"Went to England! But she never reached England. At any rate she has never been heard of since, and nobody knows where she is."

"Then they must have been robbed and murdered on the way," said Martino, turning pale. "I know Gabrielle had a large sum of money in her possession, though she did not tell me how much. Poor Vera! she was a dear, sweet child."

"In that case," said Balmaine, "the mystery is solved and my task completed. But do you really think it is so, M. Martino—that this poor child has perished?"

"I do not see how it can be otherwise. I myself saw Gabrielle and the little girl leave Locarno. I myself put them in the Fluelin diligence, *en route* for Lucerne and London, which they counted on reaching the third day. Unless they are murdered where are they? Can you tell me that, M. Balmaine?" said the Italian excitedly.

"Indeed I cannot. I wish I could."

"And Gabrielle never wrote to me as she promised. That is another sign of evil."

"Was she honest, this woman? You say she had a large sum of money. Where did she get it?"

"From the patron. Yes, she was a very honest

woman, and she was devoted to the patron and the little girl, and I know that Leonino charged her to go at once to his father in London."

"Leonino! Who is Leonino?"

"Ah! you don't know. Leonino was Vera's father. We always called him Leonino—it was the name of his wife—to conceal his nationality from the Austrians, who had threatened to hang without trial any foreign Garibaldian that might fall into their hands; partly, I think, because he had the idea that taking an Italian name would more completely identify him with the Italian cause."

"And was the daughter — was Vera generally known by that name?" asked Balmaine eagerly.

"Of course. It was the name M. Hardy adopted. But I must tell you this, that I had him buried as Philip Hardy, and I recommended Gabrielle always to call the child Miss Hardy after leaving Locarno."

"And what was she like, Miss Hardy? You said just now she was pretty. Can you tell me the colour of her hair and her eyes?"

"Certainly," returned Martino, with a look of surprise. "I remember very well. Her hair it was light, a little red or chestnut, like her father's; her eyes—yes, they were bright and dark—like her mother's, very expressive; and her skin, it had a rich olive tint."

“And she would now be about eighteen?”

“It is so; she would now be about eighteen if she were living, *la précieuse!*”

“She is living, M. Martino. I believe I know where she is. I have seen Vera Hardy, and you shall see her, M. Martino,” exclaimed Alfred, in suppressed excitement.

“Where? when? how? why—what do you mean?” asked the Italian, quite taken aback by this sudden and unexpected revelation.

“It must be so,” said Balmaine, more quietly; “no other theory fits in with the facts.”

And then he told Martino and Bevis (who had been an eager though rather puzzled listener to the conversation) of his meeting with Mademoiselle Leonino at the Hotel Rousseau; of her correspondence with Martino’s description, both as touching age and appearance; and of M. Senarclens’ visit and its object. Jealousy had sharpened Alfred’s wits; he felt sure that Corfe had somehow discovered that Vera was an heiress, and for that reason was seeking her in marriage.

“I believe,” he said, “that the Swiss *bonne* stole the money entrusted to her by Mr. Hardy, and instead of going to London, went to her own people in Canton Vaud.”

“I shall be glad if Leonino’s child—it is difficult for me to call him anything else—be still alive,” said Martino. “But Basta! I shall also be very

sorry if Gabrielle has done as you say. I thought her an honest woman."

"I suppose you would know her?"

"Know her! Of course I should. I think I should know Vera also—if she has not much altered."

"You shall have the opportunity very soon, M. Martino. This is Thursday. To-morrow, or on Saturday morning, we will see M. Senarclens and, I hope, Miss Leonino and her *bonne*."

Before they separated it was arranged that Martino and Balmaine should proceed to Territet on the following day, and, after seeing M. Senarclens, hunt up Vera and the *bonne*, for as yet they did not know, except generally, where the latter lived.

"Then it is a thing agreed that you two meet at the station to-morrow at eleven," said Bevis, putting on, as he sometimes did, his commanding officer manner; "let us have no misunderstandings, and then we shall have no disappointments. Better make a mem. in your note-book. There! that is all right. Another thing—I strongly advise you, M. Balmaine, to keep this matter as quiet as you can. It will get out quickly enough, and when it does, this young lady—if she really be as you say and I am disposed to think, Leonino's daughter—will be pestered to death with beggars and suitors, some of them dangerous, like this M. Corfe. I need

not say anything to you, Martino. As an old conspirator you know the value of a silent tongue."

"You speak of Corfe as if you knew something about him, Colonel," said Balmaine eagerly; "do you?"

"I know something about a good many people, M. Balmaine," answered the old soldier mysteriously, "and I can put two and two together; but it is not always wise to say everything you know and think."

This closed the conversation, and Balmaine returned to the office to finish his leader, read his proofs, and think over a little difficulty in which he found himself. He would have to pay both Martino's expenses and his own, and his pocket was almost as empty as the big safe. For railway fares—it would be quicker to go by rail, and he was burning with impatience to see Senarclens and Vera and circumvent Corfe—and other expenses he might require a couple of hundred francs.

"Is the balance at the Banque Populaire quite exhausted?" he asked Milnthorpe, just as they were about to separate for the night.

"Practically it is, I am sorry to say," answered the sub-editor with a sigh, "all but about twenty francs which I have left in, just to keep the account open, you know. Why? Are you in need?"

"Which I am," said Alfred, and then he told his colleagues of the proposed journey to Territet on

business, of which he was not at liberty just then to disclose the particulars. But he promised them that they should know all about it later on.

“That sounds mysterious,” observed Milnthorpe, “and is just the sort of thing to pique one’s curiosity; but we must try to possess our souls in patience until you come back. The main point now, as it generally is, is money. No use applying to Mayo I am afraid. Well, we must fly a kite, that’s all.”

“Raise money on a bill, you mean?”

“The accuracy with which you have guessed my meaning does credit to your intelligence, Balmaine. I know the manager of the Banque Populaire pretty well; he is a very good fellow, and I have little doubt that he will advance money on a piece of stamped paper, bearing our joint signatures.”

“I don’t much like that, though, Milnthorpe. Wouldn’t it be an accommodation bill?”

“Of course it would, and why not? Don’t you know that the *raison d’être* of the Banque Populaire is the discounting of accommodation bills, *billets de complaisance* they call ’em? If the signatures are satisfactory, that’s all they care about. If they consider two not strong enough for the amount required they ask for a third, sometimes a fourth and a fifth. The Banque Populaire, let me tell you, is a very valuable institution; it gives small people who cannot go to the big banks, and who would

otherwise have to go to the Jews—eventually to the dogs—facilities for obtaining temporary loans on personal security and reasonable terms.”

“A valuable institution, indeed,” laughed Delane, by all means let us turn it to account. I should rather like to be mixed up in a bill transaction. It will be a new sensation. I had no idea there was such an admirable system of raising the wind in Geneva, or I should have been tempted to try it before.”

“I know of but one objection to the system, Delane,” said Milnthorpe gravely.

“What is that, old man?”

“These infernal bills become due. If you want to know how fast time can fly put your name to an acceptance. A reason for not doing so now, you may say. But needs must, you know, when a certain person drives; and this journey of Balmaine’s seems important.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

M. SENARCLENS IS SURPRISED.

THE bill was drawn, signed, and handed to Milnthorpe, who declared it to be in perfect order, and promised to be at the office early next morning with the proceeds. All the same, Balmaine had his doubts as to the success of the expedient, and when ten o'clock came and the sub-editor did not show up, he began to feel very uneasy. To be unable to go to Territet for lack of funds and have to make some lame excuse to Martino, would be both a disappointment and a humiliation. Rather than that, he would take his watch—the sole memento of his father which he possessed—to the Mont de Pieté. Time pressed, Milnthorpe did not come and at 10.15 he set off on his unpleasant errand—so unpleasant that if he had been on his way to penal servitude he could not have felt much worse.

“There is only one step from the sublime to the ridiculous,” he soliloquised. “Here am I, forced to pawn my watch in order that I may inform a charming girl that she is the greatest heiress in Europe!”

But at the last moment he was spared the painful necessity. As he crossed the Island Bridge he met Milnthorpe.

“Well?” he said anxiously.

“I have succeeded—in a measure,” returned the other.

“How, in a measure?”

“We made the bill for five hundred, you know. The Banque Populaire goes as low as forty francs; but it looks more respectable to borrow twenty pounds than five or ten, and it is better to have too much than too little. But the manager looks upon five hundred as a large transaction—too large to be completed without the sanction of the Conseil d’Administration—and he would not do more than advance two hundred and fifty, pending their next meeting.”

“That will do,” said Alfred, with a sigh of relief; “less will do. Thank you very much.”

“I am glad to hear you say so, for I could do with a trifle myself, and I am sure Delane could. We are both *à sec*, as the folks here say.”

“All right. Keep a hundred francs. I daresay I can make shift with one-fifty. I don’t think the Rousseau will charge me unreasonably.”

“They won’t charge you anything if you speak a word to the manager, and tell him you are the *rédacteur-en-chef* of the *Helvetic News*.”

“I don’t think I shall do that, Milnthorpe. I am

not going on the business of the paper, and I am not one of your cadging journalists."

"Cadging, do you call it? You are too proud, Balmaine. It does not pay."

"I do not think it is pride, Milnthorpe. But be that as it may, I would rather be poor and proud than rich and a lickspittle. I did not feel comfortable not to pay when I was at the Rousseau with Corfe, though I went on the manager's express invitation. To ask for free quarters merely because I am a journalist would be a piece of shameless impudence—as much so as if I were to demand a suit of clothes from a tailor for the same reason."

"Perhaps you are right, Balmaine. It is a mean sort of thing when you come to think of it. And I fear there is a great deal too much of what you call cadging about continental journalism."

"You might give it another name—blackmailing. Mayo breakfasts two or three times a week at the Croix in a style that would cost anybody else ten francs a time, yet never thinks of paying a centime. But here we are at our office. You had better get your bag and hurry up, or you will be too late for the train. Delane and I will keep things straight until you get back."

Balmaine did not miss the train, though he had to run for it, and four hours later he and Martino were knocking at M. SenarcLens' door. They found the historian in his study, a large and lofty room

lined with bookcases and maps. Two French windows looked into a garden rich with rare shrubs and choice flowers, and commanding a glorious view of lake, mountain, and forest. In the middle of the room stood a big square table, littered with books, manuscripts, and proofs. At a smaller table sat the historian's private secretary.

"I am afraid we are hindering work," observed Alfred, after introducing Martino, "but the business on which I come admits of no delay. It concerns Mademoiselle Leonino."

He thought it best to plunge in *medias res*.

"Mademoiselle Leonino!" exclaimed M. Senarclens, looking all the surprise he felt. "What about her? Nothing unpleasant, I hope? Poor Vera!"

"She *is* called Vera, then," said Alfred, with a significant glance at Martino, who had been very doubtful as to the issue of their journey.

"Certainly she is called Vera," returned M. Senarclens, looking more surprised than ever.

"And do you know if her father was English?"

"I believe her father was your compatriot; but she was born in Italy, and her mother was also of that country."

"I told you so," exclaimed Balmaine, turning to Martino in great exultation. "I told you so. Mademoiselle Leonino is the long-lost daughter of Philip Hardy. Hurrah!"

"It must be so. It must," shouted Martino, who seemed even more excited than Alfred. "You are right, M. Balmaine. I doubt no longer. Where is the little Vera? She will remember me; I am sure she will. Many a time have I danced round my corridor at Locarno, with the child on my back singing."

And suiting the action to the word, Martino pranced round the big table, singing an Italian rhyme:—

"Bimbo non piangere;
Nascesti trito
No se desideri
Morir vestito."

The historian stared at his visitors with a look of such utter bewilderment and comic surprise that Balmaine could hardly keep from laughing outright. M. SenarcLens evidently thought—and no wonder—that his visitors had gone mad.

"It is time we explained, I think," said Alfred. "If you will stop your singing and sit down, M. Martino, I will tell M. SenarcLens our errand."

Martino took the hint and a chair, whereupon Alfred, while omitting irrelevant and non-essential details, told Vera's story from beginning to end. But he made no imputation against Gabrielle, deeming it better to let M. SenarcLens draw his own inferences from Martino's statement.

The historian listened with the deepest attention,

asking an occasional question. His countenance expressed at first surprise, then concern, and at last something like dismay.

“But you surely don’t mean,” he said, after a pause which seemed to be spent in painful thought, “you surely don’t mean that Vera is sole heiress to this immense fortune—two millions sterling? Why that is fifty million francs!”

“I think there can be no doubt of it, M. Senarclens.”

“Poor child, what a calamity!”

“A calamity?”

“Yes, ’tis a calamity, M. Balmaine—nothing less. What can be more unfortunate than for any young girl, but, above all, for a young girl without father or mother, or other natural protectors, to become possessed of wealth that might well dazzle the strongest mind, corrupt the purest nature? Surely you have noticed that the rich are always the most selfish, the most egotistic, and the most self-indulgent of mankind. This is a truth that has been recognised for ages, and nowhere more emphatically than in the sacred books of Christians in which many of the *bourgeoisie* still profess to believe. I would ten thousand times rather have heard that Vera was reduced to poverty, and had no other resource than that genius for art with which nature has so richly gifted her.”

Alfred was startled. This was a view of the

matter which had not occurred to him—he had thought he was doing Vera a great service. Yet he could not help admitting that there might be some truth in what the historian said. But even though it were altogether true his duty was clear; he must carry out his mission and inform Vera of all that had come to pass.

“I hope,” he said, “that Miss Hardy will make a good use of her fortune, and that it will not prove the calamity you fear.”

“I do not share in your confidence,” returned M. Senarclens gloomily, “unless she disembarass herself of the burden quickly—and that will be difficult—without doing more harm than good. I cannot conceive anybody possessing so many millions without being the worse for them. The right of bequest is one of those rights to do wrong which ought to be abolished; it is bad for all that there should be whole classes who neither toil nor spin and who live on the labour of others. All accumulations should go to the community, and the community in its turn should undertake the upbringing of orphans and the support of the aged and the helpless. As for Vera, it is some slight satisfaction to know that she is as well prepared to withstand the corrupting influence of wealth as any young girl could be. She is of a noble, unselfish nature; she has not been kept under a glass case, like the *jeunes filles* of the *bourgeoisie*; she has had the same

liberty as my own daughters, and has studied with them many of the best books in my library. She loves literature and art for their own sake. You will find her well instructed, M. Balmaine, and she has much sympathy with the poor."

"Is she likely to become Madame Corfe?" asked Alfred, to whom this question seemed far more important than the character of Vera's recent reading.

"No, and she has suffered much in consequence, poor girl."

"How?"

"Well, after what I heard from you I could not advise her to marry this M. Corfe, the more especially as when I came to question her closely, I found that she has neither a vocation for marriage nor a liking for this gentleman, and I would not for the world constrain a girl's choice. We are all for liberty here, M. Balmaine. But Madame Gabrielle and her father are very wishful she should marry him. The one has entreated, the other threatened her, and when he likes, M. Courbet can be very brutal. She was here in great distress yesterday, and I pressed her to come and stay with us until the storm had blown over. It is one advantage of your revelation, M. Balmaine, that Vera becomes her own mistress. The Courbets have no legal authority over her, and she is no way dependent on them."

"Not at all."

"I understand now why Gabrielle brought her here instead of taking the child to her grandfather. Another instance of the demoralising influence of money. I am sorry for Gabrielle, it will be a terrible blow to her, this discovery of her dishonesty. Yet she is not a bad woman, and I am sure it is better for Vera—physically as well as morally—to have been brought up in this mountain land as a child of the people, than in the corrupt atmosphere of London as the heiress of millions. But (smiling) this is not business. I suppose you would like to see her?"

Both Alfred and Martino said they should like to see her very much.

"I thought so. Well, Madame Senarclens and my daughter Georgette shall fetch Vera. They shall take a carriage. The journey to La Boissière occupies two hours, but one can descend the mountain in one hour. So we may expect them here about eight o'clock, and on the way my wife can break the news to Vera. She will be very much overcome, poor child. Will you then do me the favour, Messieurs, to make me another visit in three or four hours. If it were not that I must absolutely despatch these proofs (glancing at the table) to Paris by the next mail, I would ask you to dine with me. But we will have tea *à l'Anglaise* instead, let us say at eight o'clock. Will you join us?"

To this proposal Balmaine and Martino gladly assented, and at the request of the latter (who was wishful to know whether Vera would recognise him) it was agreed that she should not be informed of his arrival.

CHAPTER XIX.

A RECOGNITION.

PUNCTUALLY at eight o'clock the two men were again at the villa. Madame Senarclens had not returned, and they were shown into the salon. Though dignified with that name the room was simply furnished and evidently used more for work than show. Books were lying about. There was an easel with a half-finished sketch; an open piano stood in one corner, a harp in another; on the walls hung paintings of Alpine landscapes; on the mantelpiece were two or three exquisite statuettes; in the window recesses vases filled with flowers.

In a few minutes they were joined by M. Senarclens.

"They are not come yet," he said, "but they cannot be long. Hark! don't you hear the sound of bells and ring of hoofs on the hard road? It must be they. I will run and see. I will bring Vera in and then you can tell this strange story yourself, M. Balmaine. I am anxious——The girl

is very dear to me, and this is a supreme crisis in her life. Did I not say so? The carriage stops at the door. I will go—pray excuse me.”

“He seems nervous,” observed Martino.

“As much as we are,” answered Alfred, who was himself so nervous that he could hardly speak. For the second time in his life he was going to see this girl whom he had sought so long, and of whom he had thought so much. What would be the issue? He had a foreboding that the meeting and its consequences would influence his destiny—that a crisis in his life was also approaching.

The next moment the door opened and M. Senarclens entered the saloon leading Miss Hardy by the hand.

“This is the gentleman, Vera, who has brought the news—M. Balmaine.”

Alfred bowed and devoured the girl with his eyes. It was a sweet face, as sweet as he had thought it at the *fête*, and, strange to say, it seemed to him that it bore a certain resemblance to that of M. Senarclens—not in contour or complexion, but in those subtler and less definable features which denote character and help to spiritualise expression. There was the same dreaminess in the eyes, the same loftiness, yet benevolence of look, even the same fashion of slightly throwing back the head when speaking. But just then she was pale and agitated and her lips trembled with emotion.

"I have had the pleasure of seeing Mademoiselle before," said Alfred, as quietly as he could, "perhaps she has forgotten me."

"Oh, no, I have not, I remember you quite well," she answered hurriedly. "But do tell me—is this true—this that you have been telling my dear friends? You are not deceiving us, M. Balmaine?"

"Why should I deceive you, Mademoiselle? If you are Philip Hardy's daughter you are the heiress to an immense fortune—one of the finest in Europe."

"It seems impossible. I must have time—I cannot—What shall I do, M. Senarclens? I have heard you say often how evil a thing is wealth. I feel already what a terrible responsibility the care of this fortune will bring on me. Shall I renounce it? If you bid me I will."

"I am afraid that is too great a responsibility for me to take *ma chère*. You must decide for yourself. And I do not think you can renounce it—can she, M. Balmaine?"

"You mean she is a minor. That is so. Miss Hardy cannot renounce what she does not possess; and she will not enter into possession of her property until she is of age."

"*Tant mieux*, I am grateful for the respite. It will give me time to think, to get accustomed to the idea of my inheritance, and decide how I shall dispose of it. But I do not understand how all this

has come about so suddenly, and why I was not told sooner. Is my grandfather only just dead?"

"M. Balmaine will tell us all about it while we are at tea. Let us go into the *salle à manger*. But you do not observe that another gentleman is present. Have you met him also before, do you think?"

"I do not think so." And Vera looked earnestly at Martino, but no look of recognition came into her eyes.

"Don't you know me, Vera?" said the Italian. "Don't you remember the time when I rode you on my back:

"Bimbo non piangere ;
Nascesti trito
No si desideri
Morir vestito.

"Ecco lo maximo
Che mai non falla
E come un sughero
Ti spenge a galla."

"Martino! Martino!" cried the girl, running to him and kissing him on both cheeks. "I do remember, oh! so well. And how my father laughed when you danced round the table! It is like old times to see you, CARO AMICO. And how have you been; and why did you not write to us?"

"For a very good reason; I did not know your address, but I know you. . . . I know you, and how well you look" (she was quite flushed now), "and how handsome you have grown! I shall

never be able to thank M. Balmaine enough for discovering you. But we must go into the *salle à manger*; they are all waiting for us."

Vera put her hand into that of the old innkeeper, and they went in together and sat side by side, Balmaine being their *vis-à-vis*.

The "tea *à l'Anglaise*" was tea and little else, and poor at that, as an American would have said, which was so far fortunate that eating did not much interfere with the re-telling of the story. Though Alfred hesitated a little at first—French not being quite as familiar to him as his mother-tongue—he told his tale very well, when he warmed to his work, and at greater length than the first time—perhaps because he had in Vera an eager and charming listener. She never once took her eyes off him, and hung on his words as if he were a very Othello.

"You took much trouble about me, M. Balmaine," she said, when he had finished, "and I shall never forget your kindness. But there is one thing I do not understand—why Martino did not know where I was. Did not Gabrielle tell you where we were going, dear friend?"

"She said you were going to London, according to your father's instructions."

"Why did we not go then?"

"That you had better ask Gabrielle herself," said M. Senarclens; "she will be here to-morrow. I

have asked her to come. I think it is desirable for her to give an explanation in the presence of these gentlemen."

"It is very strange! Gabrielle has been very good; she has been like a mother to me; and until the last year or two I was very happy at La Boissière; but if my father told her to take me to London she ought to have taken me, ought she not?"

"There can be no question of that. But let us hear what Gabrielle says before we draw any conclusions. Yet in any case, even if she may not have acted altogether as she ought to have done, you will deal gently with her."

"How could I do otherwise? Gabrielle will always be very dear to me, M. Senarclens."

The person in question was meanwhile having a very bad time of it. Worried on the one side by her father, who insisted that she should make Vera marry Corfe, and by fear of Corfe on the other, tortured by prickings of conscience and dread of discovery, she was about as unhappy as well could be. Corfe had been at La Boissière a few days before, and albeit Vera's refusal put him in a rage, he would not take it as final, attributing it altogether to the shock produced by her being told of Esther's death. "She will get over that in a little while," he thought, "and though it is a great bore and awfully inconvenient, I must just wait;

and if it comes to a push I have got a pull over her she little suspects. Without me she can never get her fortune—unless I am very much mistaken.”

He asked Gabrielle how Vera had come to know of Madame Corfe’s death.

“I think M. Senarcens heard of it at the bureau of the *Helvetic News*,” said the *bonne*.

“Oh, then it’s Balmaine! I thought as much!” exclaimed Corfe, in English. “Who can tell what he said about me? Confound the fellow! I’ll stop him spoiling my copy and telling lies about me to my friends! *Dites donc*, Madame Gabrielle! I shall not be here again for a month or so; but will you let me know if anything particular occurs, and continue to use your influence with Vera in my favour. I rely upon you. And look here! silence about that packet. If you tell anybody that you have given it me—that it ever existed even—*par dieu*, I will cut your throat!”

Then he went away, leaving the *bonne* in a state of mortal terror, for there was murder in his look, and she really believed he would be as good as his word. And this was the man she had undertaken to persuade Vera to marry! How much more reason there had been in the girl’s mistrust than in her confidence!

The fetching of Vera by Madame Senarcens and her daughter made the *bonne*, if possible, still more uneasy. Such a thing had never happened before;

and the cause assigned—to meet a gentleman who had known her father—did not tend to allay her fears. Who was this gentleman? and how did he know that Vera was at La Boissière? Was he another Corfe?

CHAPTER XX.

GABRIELLE'S CONFESSION.

ALFRED was too much excited to sleep very soundly, and, rising betimes, he wrote to Artful and Higginbottom, as well as to Cora and to Warton, telling them of all that had come to pass. He asked the lawyers for instructions, as Vera, being the ward of her grandfather's trustees, would have to be guided by their instructions, and their instructions were necessary, for at present, as it seemed to him, the girl had no home. She was simply M. Senarclens' guest, and it was out of the question for her to return to La Boissière. This done, he and Martino went to Mon Repos, whither they had been invited to breakfast. Madame Senarclens, her daughters and Vera were in the garden. The historian was in his study, and it was the habit of the house not to disturb him until the ringing of the bell for second breakfast.

Vera received the two visitors with evident pleasure, kissed Martino, and offered Balmaine her hand.

“Do you still think it a misfortune to be a great heiress, Miss Hardy?” asked Alfred, after the ice had been broken by some remarks about the fineness of the weather and the grandeur of the scenery.

“How strange it sounds to be called ‘Mees Hardy!’” she said laughingly. “‘Hardy’ I like; it was the name of my father; but ‘Mees’ is very droll, and not very nice. You must admit that ‘Mademoiselle’ has a much better effect.”

“Especially Mademoiselle Leonino. It is a name which, though you may cease to bear it, I shall never forget. Would you like better for me to address you as ‘Mademoiselle?’”

“Not at all. I am an English girl, you know, and must accustom myself to English ways. You ask if I still think it a misfortune to be a great heiress. I am afraid it is. M. Senarclens thinks so, and he is the wisest and best man I know.”

“With all due deference to M. Senarclens, it seems to me that he pushes his theories a little too far. There can be no question that great wealth is a great danger. But rightly used it is a great power for good, and you might easily, by throwing your fortune away, do more harm than by keeping it, while, by refusing to accept it—if that were possible—you would deprive yourself of the means of doing an immensity of good.”

“You mean that I might help the poor, better the lot of the disinherited?”

“Exactly.”

“That is what I should like to do. It is a noble aim. Here in Canton Vaud there are not many poor. There is not a family in our commune that has not at least a bit of land and a cow, or some goats. But in the great towns, which I have not seen, they say the poverty is something frightful—that people even perish of hunger. And it does seem wrong, does it not, that while so many have more than enough, the lives of thousands of their fellow-creatures should be cut short by hardship and want?”

“It does. But you must admit, at the same time, that it is much easier to point out the wrong than suggest a remedy. Among the indigent, for instance, are many whose misfortunes arise solely from their own idleness and intemperance. Would it be right, do you think, to tax the thrifty and industrious for the support of these ne’er-do-weels? Few, moreover, work for the love of labour, and if you could—if it were possible to do away with the fear of want—the world’s work would not be done; we should relapse into barbarism.”

“Still, M. Balmaine, I think it must be possible to distinguish the criminal from the unfortunate, and see that the latter do not want. I know it is difficult, for I was reading in a book the other day that, even with the best intentions, rich people may do more harm than good. I pointed this out

to M. Senarclens. He said it was quite true, and gave it as an additional reason why there should be no rich people. If the rich who would do good cannot, he said, what harm must be done by the rich who think of nothing but their own enjoyment?"

"Let me answer you by saying what I read in a book the other day—that every good work, everything worth doing, is difficult, and that difficult does not mean impossible."

"You really think, then, that if I accept this fortune I may do good with it?"

"I am quite sure you may, Miss Hardy."

"And would you give me your advice, M. Balmaine—would you help me to turn to good this great trust?"

It was a strange request to make of him; but, as Balmaine could see, it was made in perfect innocence and good faith, "With all my heart," he said. "I am not sure that I could help you much, though, and you will find far wiser counsellors than I."

"But I know you, and as you discovered me" (smiling), "as Martino said last night, and have therefore found me the fortune, it is only right that you should share the responsibility of its disposal. However" (gaily), "that is three years off. I wish it were thirteen. I can easily live during that time on the sale of my sketches—

Georgette is quite sure they would find customers in London or Paris—and the interest Père Courbet will pay me.”

“That will not be necessary,” said Alfred, not a little amused at the idea of the heiress getting her living by selling sketches. “Though you cannot come into possession of your property until you are of age, your grandfather’s trustees will certainly make you an allowance suitable to your position.”

“Oh, I thought I should get nothing at all for three years. How much do you think they will give me?”

“Anything you like in reason, I should say.”

“Then I could buy poor Madame Wartmann another cow. The only one she had died a few days ago. It was not insured, and she is in great trouble. I know where I could get a good milker with a calf at foot, for about 470 francs—perhaps 450—do you think I might?”

“I have no doubt the trustees will be delighted to place that sum, and a great deal more, at your disposal, Miss Hardy?”

“Oh, I am very happy. Madame Wartmann shall have a cow better than the one she lost. You do not think I shall be doing more harm than good?” said Vera demurely, but with a mischievous twinkle in her dark eyes.

“Certainly not. You are beginning to find out

what a fine thing it is to be rich. I could not buy Madame Wartmann a cow?"

"You have no fortune then?"

"Yes, I have. My head, my hands, some energy, and a great deal of hope."

"Add cleverness, for if you were not clever you could not be the editor of a newspaper. If I were a man I should ask for nothing more than you possess. And if you want money, when I receive my inheritance, you have only to say how much and it is yours, for without you it would never have been mine."

"You are really too good, Miss Hardy," said Balmaine, smiling at her *naïveté*, "but I trust you will not think me ungracious if I am unable to take advantage of your too generous offer."

"You mean you cannot take money from me?"

Alfred made a gesture of assent.

"You are not consistent. You advised me just now not to refuse this fortune, and now you refuse a part of it. Why?"

"The circumstances are very different. Your fortune comes by bequest from your grandfather."

"You puzzle me, M. Balmaine. Why should it be right to receive money as the gift of a dead man and wrong to receive money as the gift of a living person?"

"It is a matter of feeling and difficult to explain, as matters of feeling always are. When you are

three years older you will perhaps be better able to understand my motives. And you are mistaken in giving me all the credit of finding you out. It was Warton, the lawyer's clerk at Calder, who first suggested that you had strayed or been stolen, and induced me to look for you. But for him I should never have had the slightest inkling of your existence, and as he went into the matter professionally, and is a poor man with a wife and family, I think he well deserves, and would willingly accept, some payment for the service he has rendered."

"He shall have it, M. Balmaine, and you yourself shall fix the amount. We will talk of this another time. We must go in now, the bell rang a few minutes ago; and M. Senarcens, as he often tells us, is too busy a man not to be punctual. *Allons.*"

Alfred thought that Philip Hardy's daughter was the most singular girl he had ever met. Her manner was entirely *sans gene*; she showed as much *aplomb* and self-possession as a woman of the world, yet neither overstepped the limits of modesty nor betrayed the faintest symptom of self-consciousness. It did not seem to occur to her that there was anything unusual in the conversation they had just held, or in the remarks which she had made. She evidently saw no more impropriety in treating Balmaine with the frankness of an old friend, than a child sees in letting itself be fondled by anybody whose face wins its confidence. Alfred's face had

won her confidence, just as Corfe's had roused her distrust. She knew next to nothing either of conventionalities of society or inequalities of rank. In the mountains they did not exist, at Mon Repos they were either ignored or denounced. At the same time, there was nothing about her either ungirlish or pedantic. She would discuss a question of social ethics or a point in history with M. Senarclens one moment, and be running round the garden with Georgette the next. Painting and reading were her favourite occupations; but she made her own dresses, was a good cook and a keen hand at small bargains, and could have earned her living as a dairy-maid. As M. Senarclens said, Vera was a well-instructed girl; he might have added that in some things she was as ignorant as an infant.

In the afternoon Gabrielle came, and was shown into the salon, where, in a few minutes, she was joined by Vera, whose kindly greeting reassured her, and she began to think her fears were premature. Then the door opened a second time, and M. Senarclens, followed by Balmaine and Martino, entered the room.

"I think there is somebody here you ought to know," observed Vera, pointing to Martino.

"Don't you know me, Mademoiselle Gabrielle?" said the Italian, coming forward and offering her his hand.

"Signor Martino!" exclaimed the *bonne*, in a low intense voice, her face turning deadly pale. "I did not expect to see you here."

"I dare say not; but why did you not write to me as you promised?"

"Because—because"—(desperately). "It is no use trying to deceive you. I will tell the truth—I will tell everything." (Here she sank into a chair and wiped the perspiration from her brow.) "Yes, I will tell the truth."

"By all means," put in M. Senarclens soothingly, "as well for Vera's sake as for your own peace of mind. We guess much, but we want to know all."

So the *bonne* made a clean breast of it; and though she did not try to justify herself, she laid great stress on the temptation to which she had been exposed, and pleaded further in extenuation of her offence that she feared M. Hardy *père* might deprive her of the care of Vera, "who was dearer to her than her life." One thing only she kept back—that she had received a packet of papers from her master and given it to Corfe. She had persuaded herself that it was of no importance, and she feared Corfe's vengeance.

"I know I have done you a great wrong," said Gabrielle, when her confession was finished, turning to Vera with streaming eyes, "and that you can never, never forgive me; but I was sorely tried,

my darling ; and your money is safe—my father will pay it all back.”

“Never forgive you !” said Vera, tenderly, putting her arms round Gabrielle’s neck and kissing her. “Never forgive you ! Why you are my benefactor. You have been to me as a mother. My grandfather died almost at the same time as my father. If you had taken me to London I should have been brought up by strangers, my life would have been wretched, whereas here, in this mountain land, I have been very happy.”

“But my father has been so cross, Vera ; he has used you very ill.”

“Only since your mother died, and I have been so much with my dear friends here that it was not much, after all. Do not let that trouble you, Gabrielle.”

“It is like you, Vera, to make little of your *bonne’s* fault,” said M. Senarclens, gravely ; “and I am quite of your opinion that her bringing you to Canton Vaud has been for your good ; but it might have been just the reverse, and Gabrielle did very wrong, and exposed you to serious risk, by forgetting her promise to your father. I do not think the end in this case justifies the means. But it is not for me to sit in judgment on you, Gabrielle, for after all, you are more sinned against than sinning. If there were no such institution as property, your father would not have got into trouble and you

would have been under no temptation to lend him M. Hardy's money."

"In that case," observed Balmaine, with a covert smile, "it is just possible that there would have been none of Mr. Hardy's money to lend."

The historian made as if he was going to reply, but seeing that Vera had something to say, he refrained.

"Can I dispose of this money?" she asked. "I shall not want it, and I should like to give it—not to Père Courbet, who has plenty already and is very avaricious—but to Gabrielle, who, although she has done so much for me, has taken nothing for herself."

"At present, I do not think you can, Vera," said M. Senarclens.

"And I would not take it from you if you could," said Gabrielle. "I shall never feel happy until it is repaid. And we have plenty without it; there is only my father and me."

"We will see," returned Vera, with a smile; and (whispering) "keep up your courage; if I go to England, you shall go with me."

The *bonne* went back to La Boissière happier than she had been for many a day—so happy that she forgot for a while the bad quarter of an hour she would have to pass with her father and the packet which she had so unfortunately given to Corfe.

CHAPTER XXI.

BALMAINE'S DEFEAT.

AFTER Gabrielle was gone—and her visit did not last more than half-an-hour—M. SenarcLens went, as usual, into his study, and Balmaine and Martino betook themselves to the garden, where they smoked, contemplated the scenery and talked with the ladies. As before, Alfred fell into conversation with Vera. He told her that he should be obliged to leave for Geneva by the next morning's steamer; but Martino liked the neighbourhood so well that he proposed to stay there a few days longer, returning to Geneva on his way to Italy.

"I am sorry you are obliged to return so soon," said Vera, "for though I have known you so short a time, you have taken so kind an interest in me and my affairs that I look upon you rather as an old friend than a new acquaintance."

"I am glad to hear you say so," answered Alfred gaily; "and you may be sure that I shall do my best to prove myself as true a friend as if I were

really an old one. And I do not suppose it will be long before we meet again. I shall be hearing from Artful and Higginbottom in the course of a post or two."

"The lawyers?"

"Yes."

"Does my destiny depend upon them?"

"In a great measure. The trustees will doubtless be a good deal guided by their advice."

"Shall I have to go to England very soon, do you think?"

"Probably. Yes; I dare say they will want you to go to England. Why! Don't you want to go?"

"I should like to see England very much, but I think I would rather first go to Italy. Will you be there?"

"In Italy or England?"

"In England."

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I know nobody there. I shall be a stranger in a strange land, and I am so ignorant of the world and its ways. My life, since I was seven years old, has been spent here. For all that time I have never once been out of sight of the lake and these mountains, and a country without mountains I can hardly imagine. To meet in London somebody whom I have known here would be like a gleam of sunshine during a black *bise*."

"Don't compare London to a black *bise*, if you

please, Miss Hardy. It is not quite so bad as that. And there are other places in England besides London—and some very beautiful ones. And you will very soon make friends—troops of them.”

“But you have not answered my question.”

“About England?”

“Yes.”

“I am afraid there is very little chance of my being in England for a long time, Miss Hardy.”

He was afraid; yet three days before he would have regarded return to England as little less than a calamity!

“I suppose you will stay here for the present?” asked Balmaine, by way of changing the subject.

“I do not know what else I can do. After the last scene with Père Courbet, it would be too painful to return to La Boissière.”

“The old ragamuffin! He was very rude, then?”

“Very,” said the girl, reddening at the recollection of the old man’s threats of what he would do if she persisted in her refusal of Corfe. “But never mind that now—it is past. Let us talk about something more agreeable—the Senarclens, for instance. M. Senarclens is a noble character, and he has the courage of his principles. He would rather die than do anything which he deems incompatible with his dignity and his honour. The Emperor has made

him the most splendid offers. If he would only go to Paris and accept the Empire, he might be a senator, member of the Academy—anything he liked—have both honours and money. But he treats them all with disdain, and lives here in voluntary exile. As you see, the family live very simply, and he gives much—chiefly, I think, to brother exiles who are less fortunately circumstanced than himself.”

“Yes, as you say, M. Senarcens is a man of noble nature. But, though I admire his courage, his constancy, and his learning, I cannot say as much for his opinions. Some of them are awfully wild.”

“If you mean by wild that they are not well thought out, you are wrong. For every one of his opinions M. Senarcens can give very excellent reasons. I have heard several people try to confute him, but they always retire discomfited.”

“You are a partial judge, I fear, Miss Hardy. But did you notice the singular remark he made a little while ago in reference to Madame Gabrielle—that it was not one of those cases in which the end justifies the means?”

“Well.”

“Can there be such a case?”

Vera smiled.

“Of course there can.”

“You really think there are circumstances in

which we are justified in doing evil that good may come."

"I did not say so, M. Balmaine, and I might retort by asking you to define good and evil. I do not think you would find it very easy. But I will meet you on your own ground, and use the words in their ordinary acceptation. I presume you would consider war an evil?"

"Certainly," said the unsophisticated youth, falling headlong into the trap which this ingenious maiden had set for him.

"I was not aware you were a Quaker, M. Balmaine," returned Vera, with an amused smile.

"I am not a Quaker, Miss Hardy. How could you conceive so absurd an idea?" said Balmaine, with some warmth.

"Then you are of opinion that war, in certain eventualities may be justifiable."

"Decidedly."

"So war is a justifiable evil. The end—say of a people struggling to be free—sanctifies the means. I do not think you could confute M. Senarcens, M. Balmaine," said Vera, bursting into a merry laugh.

"I acknowledge my defeat," answered Alfred, good-humouredly, though he felt very much sold. "I am thoroughly beaten; I made an initial mistake. I should have said that war is not always an evil."

“But it always is an evil. It must be bad for men to kill and maim each other, and the doing so can only be defended on the ground that still greater evils are thereby avoided. When nations go to war they do evil that good may come; but very often, unfortunately, the expectation is not fulfilled. Slavery is an evil, but society enslaves its malefactors for their greater good. If the principle that the end does not justify the means were insisted upon, there would be an end, not alone to government, but to every sort of authority.”

“Who taught you to argue, may I ask, Miss Hardy?”

“M. Senarcens. We often have discussions—he and I and Georgette—generally on some subject suggested by what we have been reading. We take whichever side we prefer, and he takes the other.”

“And always beats you, I suppose?”

“Nearly; but once or twice the cause we have espoused has been too strong for him, and victory has declared for us.”

“I should like to be present at one of your discussions.”

“Well, when you come again, you perhaps may. We are reading Herbert Spencer’s ‘Sociology,’ and that promises to be very suggestive of topics. But” (here her countenance fell) “if I go away we can have no more discussions, no more sals by moon-

light to La Meillerie, no more pleasant excursions to Les Avants and the Rochers de Naze. Ah, M. Balmaine, I almost wish you had not discovered me ! ”

“ I am sorry to hear you say that, Miss Hardy—— ”

“ But ” (eagerly) “ perhaps they will let me come back. Do you think they will ? ”

“ I have not a doubt of it ; and nobody will be more pleased to see you back than I, for in all probability, I shall remain in Switzerland several years. ”

“ I beg pardon for interrupting you, M. Balmaine, but don't you think it is time we set out on our proposed walk to Chillon ? ”

The speaker was Martino. He had been describing Algeria to Madame Senarclens and Georgette.

“ Quite time,” said Alfred, with feigned alacrity, and looking at his watch ; “ I had no idea how late it was. I am sure these ladies must be getting tired of us. ”

“ Quite the contrary,” said Madame Senarclens, graciously. “ M. Martino has interested us very much with his account of Algeria, and Vera does not look as if she were tired of your conversation, M. Balmaine. We generally take a walk about this time ourselves, and if you have no objection, we will accompany you to Chillon. I daresay, too,

that my husband would be glad to make one of the party.

Balmaine and Martino declared that nothing would please them better, and they had a most enjoyable walk to the old castle. On the way thither, M. Senarclens entertained them with an account of its history, and told some legends about the castle which are not found in ordinary chronicles.

CHAPTER XXII.

CATCHING AT STRAWS.

ON arriving at Geneva Balmaine went straight to the office of the *Helvetic News*. He had written the greater part of his leader at the Rousseau, and it required only a few retouches, and rounding off with a sentence or two in conclusion, to be ready for the printer.

He found the two subs at their post. They hoped he had enjoyed his journey, and he asked if anything particular had happened during his absence.

“Rather,” said Delane, “something very particular. Mayo sent us each fifty francs yesterday, and said there would be a hundred for you on Monday. But as I have not much confidence in that safe, big as it is, I said I was sure it would be a great convenience for you to have the money to-day, and that if he would give it to me I would hand it to you. Here it is, a nice crisp hundred-franc note.”

“Thank you very much, old fellow. What do

you suppose has happened—where has the money come from?”

“He has opened a new banking account,” said Milnthorpe, “and drawn bills against the orders Bevis brought the other day. It seems that you can discount unaccepted drafts in this country, and it is not customary to present them for acceptance before they fall due, a mighty convenience for financial dodgers like Mr. Mayo. And he will let these bankers—I don’t know who they are—have as many as they can digest, I’ll warrant.”

“There’s a private letter and a telegram for you at the pension, Balmaine,” put in Delane. “I thought you would be calling there before you came here, so I did not bring them.”

“A telegram! When did it come?”

“Yesterday. I would have sent it on to you, but I was not quite sure whether you meant to leave the Rousseau last night or this morning.”

“Curious,” said Alfred. “I cannot think who in this country is likely to send me a private telegram. It must be about the paper. You should have opened it, Delane.”

“It was marked *personnel*.”

“Ah, that makes it more curious still. However, I shall see what it is when I get home, and that won’t be long. Whistle for the boy, Delane, and tell Lud to let me have a pull of the leader as soon as possible. Here is the first part of it.”

When the work on hand was finished, Balmaine told his friends what had taken him to the other end of the lake. He did not see any reason why Vera's story should be kept secret, even if it could, and it was better that they should have the facts from him than a garbled version of them from somebody else.

"You see, I was right," observed Milnthorpe; "I knew Corfe was after money. Catch him marrying a portionless girl!"

"I hope he did not chuck his wife down that hole in order to qualify himself for taking another," said Delane lightly.

"I should not be at all surprised if he did," returned Milnthorpe seriously; "many things more unlikely have happened."

"What a suspicious fellow you are, Milnthorpe!" said Balmaine.

"So I am, of people I don't like, and I don't like Corfe a dashed bit."

Alfred made no reply, but when he recalled his conversation with Corfe on their way to the Rousseau *fête*, and remembered how possible it was, despite his disclaim, for him to have heard something of the Hardys in Italy, or from some of his Italian friends in Geneva, he had his thoughts. And then there occurred to him—strange that it had not occurred to him before—the strange discussion about murder just before the journey to

Chamouni, and he asked himself whether it was possible that Delane's jest expressed a truth, and Corfe had killed his wife in order that he might marry Vera Hardy. He could hardly think so—it would be really too atrocious. And yet the circumstances, look at them as he might, were undeniably suspicious, and true or false, they were an additional reason for watching over Vera's safety and standing between her and harm. Dangers might threaten her he knew not of.

Delane and Milnthorpe were going to sup at the Café du Roi; but Alfred, curious about his telegram, went straight home. It was from Cora, and as follows :

“ Your mother grew suddenly worse this morning and died at four this afternoon. Shall bury her on Tuesday.”

He read the fateful words a second and a third time, to make sure that he had gathered their purport aright, and then, sinking into a chair, covered his face with his hands. His poor mother! He thought of her, not as the querulous invalid which misfortune had made her, but as the genial, easy-tempered woman she had been in the happy days at their old home; how indulgently she had treated him in his boyhood, how tenderly nursed him in his long illness! Days gone beyond recall, the home

broken up, the members of the household dispersed and dead. His father and mother gone, George in India, Cora in Calder, himself in Geneva. All this had befallen in little more than two years, and as Alfred mentally rehearsed these incidents of a painful past, his heart was heavy within him. It seemed as if his misfortunes would never cease.

Then he opened his letters. One was from his cousin, written the Thursday before. It told him that his mother's chronic illness had begun to assume a graver character; that they had called in a doctor, who did not think there was any immediate danger, and that if Mrs. Balmaine's symptoms became serious (which Cora did not apprehend) she would telegraph to him at once.

It was evident that the symptoms had become so much more serious that his mother had died within the following twenty-four hours. What should he do? That was the question. To receive his mother's blessing, or to see her laid in the ground, he would have gone to Calder, cost what it might—even his situation. But now it was too late for either. If he were to leave the following afternoon—and he could not leave before—he would not be able to reach Calder until Wednesday night or Thursday morning. But he might perhaps be of use to Cora. He would telegraph and ask the question, and act accordingly. It was satisfactory to think that, at his instance, his mother had made a

will, leaving the furniture at the cottage, and anything else she might have, to her niece.

So the telegram was dispatched, and in the course of the following day came the answer: "*You must not think of coming; it is not at all necessary. I write.*"

Cora's letter, besides giving full particulars of his mother's last illness, informed him that so soon as she had administered the will and disposed of the furniture, his cousin would leave Calder for good. An old friend of her father's living in London had invited her to stay with him and his wife for an indefinite time, and she meant for the future to make London her home, and literature her profession. She had received an offer for the serial copyright of her novel, and though it was very disappointing, being a mere trifle, she should accept it, and hope for better luck another time. And perhaps she ought to esteem herself fortunate in getting the story accepted on any terms. The sale of the furniture and other effects might bring in some two hundred pounds, quite enough to keep her—especially as her board for the present would cost her nothing—until she could earn her living by her pen. Anticipating an offer of help from Alfred, she told him that she was resolved to be independent of everybody—even of him. "I consider myself," she wrote, "quite as able to earn my own living as you are to earn yours."

At any rate, I mean to try. If I fail I will ask you for help with as little hesitation as I am sure in similar circumstances you would ask me."

Balmaine sorrowed for his mother, but he had too many occupations and distractions to brood over his sorrow. Two days after his return from Territet he received a letter from Artful and Higginbottom, thanking him warmly, on behalf of the trustees, for his exertions in seeking Miss Hardy, and congratulating him on his success. Mr. Artful would leave London for Switzerland towards the end of the week, for the double purpose of escorting Vera to England and putting into proper shape the evidence of Martino and Gabrielle Courbet, with a view to establishing the young lady's identity. Mr. Artful proposed to travel by way of Geneva, and, being ignorant of the French language, said that he should esteem it a favour if Mr. Balmaine could accompany him to Territet.

Alfred had nothing to say against this proposal. He would only be too glad to make another visit to Territet; but he thought it might be as well to mention the matter to Mayo, and obtain leave of absence beforehand. So he went downstairs, demanded an interview with the manager, and told his story. It raised him, as he could easily perceive, immediately in Mayo's estimation.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the latter, "I never

knew anything like it. Highly romantic, is it not? And how close you have kept it all this time! I had no idea, when you went to Italy there, what you were after. And the fortune is a large one, you say. How much do you suppose she will have?"

"I don't know exactly; but it is said about two millions."

"Whew! By the Lord Harry! two millions! Now look here, Balmaine, don't you think you could turn Miss Hardy to account for the paper somehow? We would stand you a thumping commission if you could."

"Would you like me to ask her for an advertisement?" said Alfred, outwardly grave though inwardly much amused.

"An advertisement!" returned the manager, who had evidently made the proposal in all seriousness. "Something very much better than that, I hope. Money, Balmaine, money! that's what the *Helvetic* wants! You might ask Miss Hardy to advance us some, or make the paper her organ and subsidise it, or help us to turn the concern into a company by taking a lot of shares. Look here, Balmaine (confidentially), you have quite as much interest in this thing as I have. We are all living out of the paper, and I tell you frankly that unless something is done I cannot carry it on much longer. Now the season has begun, and Bevis has got to work, and with the discount account I have succeeded in

opening with a new banking firm here I dare say we may weather through the summer; but when the winter comes we shall be up the spout, to a dead certainty, unless, as I say, we can reorganize our finances. For my part, I have not left a stone unturned. I have tried through a friend at Rome, to get a subsidy from Cardinal Antonelli."

"From whom?" interrupted Balmaine. He thought Mayo had got hold of the wrong name.

"Cardinal Antonelli, the Pope's head bottle-washer, you know. I heard that the Curia wanted to have an Ultramontane organ at Geneva, so I offered to write up the Roman Catholic religion, and print any articles not actionable they might send, for a subvention of 25,000 francs a year. No go, though! I expect the Papal treasury is something like our safe—not too well filled just now. I am now in treaty with the French Government—the Bureau Secret de la Presse, you know. I have offered to insert articles advocating the imperial policy and that, in consideration of a monthly payment. I am not very sanguine about the result though. They want too many particulars about the circulation, and ask how many copies we sell in London; and *entre nous* the circulation is nothing to boast of, either in London or anywhere else. Leyland has also been hard at work, and is yet. He has gone to London again. Not long since he was on the point of concluding an arrange-

ment with Sir Haverstock Hill, the Radical member for Putney, you know. His views are very advanced, and he wanted an organ, but it fell through at the last moment. Somebody offered him a society paper, and he preferred that. At present Leyland is negotiating with the Society for Promoting Family Worship. They have a fancy for starting an evangelical organ on the Continent. He thinks they will bite; but after so many disappointments I am not disposed to be over confident. Anyhow, I would much rather enter into an arrangement with Miss Hardy. If you can work it, Balmaine, you may name your own salary, and put in the paper whatever you like."

"I am very much obliged to you," said Alfred quickly, "but there is an obstacle in the way, which I fear may not be easily overcome. Miss Hardy is a minor."

"The deuce! I did not know that. No go, then. She could not enter into a contract. But look here, Balmaine: a girl in her position can have as much money as she likes. She has only to ask and have. And it is money we want, you know. Anyhow, you will see; and if there is a chance bear us in mind."

"Yes," said Alfred drily, "I will bear you in mind."

"As for going to Territet for a few days," the manager went on, "of course you can—for a fort-

night, if you like. Delane and Milnthorpe can do all but the leaders, and if you will send us one or two on Swiss subjects we can manage the rest amongst us, I have no doubt."

"I was not aware you did anything in that line, Mr. Mayo," said Balmaine in some surprise.

"Well, as far as that goes, I could not write a leader to save my life, but I can fake one up when needs must. Before Gibson came we had an interregnum—no editor for several weeks—and Delane and I had to step into the breach; and I flatter myself we did very well too. We took one of the least read of the London dailies—the *Morning Mail*, for instance. It is a paper hardly ever seen on the *Continent*. Knocked the head and tail off the leader we most fancied—just to tone it down, you know—altered a word here and there to give it local colour, found it a name, and had it set up."

"And were you never found out?"

"I don't think so. And the chances were very much against our being found out. To begin with, we have not a very wide circle of readers, I am sorry to say; and I do not think that one in ten of them reads even your leaders, admirable as they are. Then, if you consider that the *Morning Mail's* subscribers are relatively as few as ours, and not one man in a thousand knows anything about a leading article ten minutes after he has read it,

you will see how very remote was the chance of detection."

"You don't think leaders are of much use then?" observed Balmaine, rather disgusted by the disparagement of a calling in which he was beginning to consider himself rather a shining light.

"To be frank with you I don't, especially those in the London dailies, which look as if they were ground out of a machine at so much a yard—always the same length, and always divided into three pars."

"Why do you continue them in the *Helvetic*, then?"

"Because they are the fashion, look well in the paper, please the Philistines, impose on the weak-minded, and help us to advertisements. If we dispensed with leaders Continental advertisers might not look upon us as a *grand journal Anglais*."

"Then I'm not quite so useless as I was beginning to fear," said Balmaine smiling. "*Au revoir*, Mr. Mayo."

CHAPTER XXIII.

CORFE GETS HIS CONGÉ.

Two or three days later the manager came into Alfred's room, with a letter which he asked him to read. It was from Corfe, complaining of the editor's "so-called corrections" of his copy, but which, as he alleged, were so far from being improvements that they often made him say the very reverse of what he had written and ruined his articles utterly—"which is perhaps what Mr. Balmaine desires." He had stood this treatment patiently for some time, but endurance had its limits, and he should for the future send his copy to Mr. Mayo, whose corrections, if he thought it necessary to make any, Corfe would gladly accept.

"Well?" said the manager.

"I have made only such alterations in Corfe's copy as I thought necessary," said Alfred, "and I should fail in my duty if I did otherwise."

"I quite agree with you. There can be no appeal from an editor's decision in these matters. Could you dispense with Corfe's articles?"

"I dare say we could. They are often weak,

though good sometimes. But nobody's articles should be indispensable. However, they do very well on the whole, and are, I think, worth quite what they cost."

"Never mind that, if you think you can do without them. I mean to save twenty-five francs a week. Corfe has never given me the chance before."

So Mayo sat down and wrote a letter in which, after thanking Corfe cordially for his services to the paper, and deploring his difference with the editor, he observed that, as it would be impossible for him (Mayo) to look over his communications, there was no alternative but to discontinue them, and he had instructed the cashier to remit Mr. Corfe a cheque for the balance due to him up to the end of the current month. (It was a long time before Corfe got it, though.)

"There," said the manager, "I think that is rather neatly done. I thought Corfe was more wide awake than to give me such an opening. But I suppose he lost his temper, and he has a fearful conceit of himself."

"It is your doing, remember," returned Balmaine. "I am sorry you are dismissing him—though I cannot say that his articles are particularly useful—if only because he is sure to visit his displeasure on me."

"Never you mind; I'll back you up," said Mayo. "Besides, what harm can he do you?"

Almost at the same time that this came to pass, stories—all, of course, more or less distorted or exaggerated—about the Hardy inheritance and the finding of Vera began to be bruited about, and Corfe had a letter from Gabrielle Courbet, telling him of Balmaine and Martino's visit to Mon Repos and all that had befallen there. She was in hopes that this news might settle him, and that he would now cease from troubling her. But he wrote by the very next post a fiery letter, bidding her at her peril not to omit acquainting him with all that occurred, and everything concerning Vera which might come to her knowledge. Then in his anger—for the proceeding was scarcely politic—he wrote two other letters, one to Balmaine, the other to Miss Hardy.

Corfe told Alfred in very strong language that he knew particularly well to whom he was indebted for the loss of his post on the *Helvetic News*, and that, as Balmaine would soon find, it was about the worst day's work he had ever done. "So you have discovered Miss Hardy," he went on, "or rather Bevis has, for you are too stupid and conceited to discover anybody. I suppose you mean to marry her. You have impudence enough for anything. But you will save us both some trouble by dismissing that idea from your mind. I am watching you, and shall take good care that you neither get her nor her money."

Had Alfred been older and wiser he might have treated this effusion with contempt, but being young and impetuous, Corfe's insults put him in such a rage, that if the former gentleman had been on the premises there would have been hats on the green—unless, as was not very probable, he had taken his beating quietly. But as Balmaine cooled down and thought the matter over, he saw how unwise it would be to enter on a quarrel with Corfe, in which Vera's name would almost necessarily be mixed up, and he resolved to take no notice of the letter—for the present. The sting of it—that which most aggravated him—was the imputation, so brutally put, that he had sought Miss Hardy all this time only that he might marry her for her money. Corfe, moreover, was not likely to be alone in making these insinuations; what he said other people would think, and he himself be set down as that most odious of characters, an intriguing heiress-hunter. It was even conceivable that the tale might reach the ears of Vera. The thought drove him nearly wild, for he could not conceal from himself that the admiration he had at first conceived for her was fast ripening into love—not such a passing fancy as he had felt for Lizzie Hardy, but a strong overmastering passion which, as he thought, would last as long as life itself. With this fact, and the other fact that Vera was hopelessly beyond his reach, Corfe's letter had brought him face to

face. The fortune he had helped her to find raised between them a barrier more impassable than the Alps. How could he, a penniless journalist, hope to win a girl with two millions? The mere attempt would justify Corfe's ignoble taunts, and lower him irretrievably in the estimation of Vera herself. She would believe—as it was natural in the circumstances she should—that he wooed her only for her money; and if the idea did not occur to her spontaneously, the first-comer would whisper it in her ear. To protest his disinterestedness would be useless; no one would believe him. His duty seemed clear; he must renounce all hope of winning Vera, and bury his love in his own heart. Yet he could not desert her. It was not merely that he found a great pleasure in her company, a pleasure which, though he was now alive to its danger, he could not bring himself to forego. She had few friends, and would evidently be exposed to many dangers, dangers of which he might warn her, and from which he might, perchance, even unknown to herself, sometimes guard her. M. Senarclens was not far wrong after all; a huge fortune was by no means an unalloyed blessing; and the Hardy heritage seemed likely to bring Vera more care than happiness.

Vera herself was beginning to be very much of the same opinion, for she, too, had received a letter from Corfe, which gave her great concern. He had

heard, he said, of her accession of fortune, and offered her thereon his warmest felicitations, but she must remember that she had not yet come into possession, and though the statement might appear strange, he could assure her that without his help she never would come into possession of the Hardy inheritance. He still loved her as much as ever, and if she would favour him with an interview and accept his hand, he would explain his meaning and prove his words. "Balmaine pretends to have found you," he went on, "and brought you the first news of your fortune, and he does not mean to go unrewarded. He means to have both you and your money—if you let him—as he has openly boasted since his return to Geneva. I shall call at Mon Repos in the course of a few days to pay my respects and receive my answer."

Vera's first proceeding after reading this effusion, was to inform Josephine, the servant who attended to the door, that if a gentleman of the name of Corfe called she declined to see him. She was to use these very words: "Mademoiselle Hardy declines to see you."

Then she went into the garden to think. Corfe's mysterious threat affected her hardly at all. If obtaining her fortune depended on his help—which she did not believe—she would rather be without it. She was beginning to hate this man. How dared he insinuate that Balmaine was as base as himself!

Balmaine, who had behaved so well—so nobly even—and of whom M. Senarclens thought so highly, of whom she too thought so highly. And yet the accusation was very specific. He had openly boasted that he meant to have both her and her money. No, it was impossible; she could not believe that this young man, who spoke so frankly and seemed so unselfish, was a sordid fortune-seeker; if she could she would never see him again. Her faith in human nature would be gone for ever, and she should know that, save M. Senarclens, all men were base. Again she said impossible. Corfe was false, Balmaine disinterested and sincere; and yet deep down in her mind there was a feeling that if his loyalty could be proved before all the world and beyond dispute, she would willingly forfeit the fortune which he was said to covet.

And this, though the greatest, was not the only trouble that this fortunate maiden's inheritance brought her. The Senarclens were just the same as before; but the domestics treated her with marked deference; when she went out people stared at her and pointed her out to each other. Every day the post brought her more and more letters, until M. Senarclens laughingly declared she would require at least two private secretaries. All contained requests for money, and Vera's heart was torn with the tales of distress which some of them revealed; but as she had no money and it was physically impossible

for her to answer them all, she answered only a few and destroyed the rest. Visitors innumerable came almost every day, and as Madame Senarclens could not keep a domestic to do nothing in the world but open the door, a notice was posted on the garden gate to the effect that Mademoiselle Hardy received no strangers with whom she had not previously made an appointment. But this did not prevent them from waiting in the road, and whenever poor Vera showed her face outside the garden, she was beset by a crowd of promiscuous beggars, from villainous-looking mendicants on the tramp, who demanded alms, to painfully polite secretaries of charitable institutions, who doffed their hats and offered their cards. Things came at last to such a pass, that when she wanted to take the air she had to steal out by stratagem, and travel by boat to parts of the country where she was unknown.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A GIRL OF CHARACTER.

"If this continues, Vera," said M. Senarclens one day, "and M. Artful does not come and take you away, we shall have to hide you up in the mountains, or keep you *au secret* on the other side of the lake."

But a few days later the lawyer put in an appearance—a full fortnight after the time he had fixed—and with him came Balmaine, for whom he had called at Geneva. The little French which he was supposed to speak turned out to be none at all, so that Vera had to make shift to express herself in her mother-tongue—if English can be called the mother-tongue of one whose mother was an Italian. She read and wrote the language with comparative ease; the habit of speaking it she had almost lost. However, with Balmaine's help she did pretty well. She had no difficulty in understanding Mr. Artful, who spoke slowly and with lawyer-like precision, and it was not long before she made him understand her.

He told her and Balmaine—who was always

present when business was discussed—that the trustees had placed at his disposal a sufficient sum of money for all expenses, and whatever moderate amount she might need for her own purposes he was authorised to let her have. He used the word “moderate” designedly, for as the executors might have to request the Court of Chancery to administer the trusts of the will, it behoved them to act with great circumspection, and to take no step which they would not be able to justify. With the depositions of Martino and Gabrielle Courbet in his possession, he entertained no doubt whatever that Vera was the long-sought heiress, and that the Court would sanction all he proposed to do. He had already paid Martino his travelling expenses and a *douceur* for his services, and he now asked Balmaine if there were any other claims of a like character “which equity required him to satisfy.”

Alfred mentioned Bevis.

“Yes, I think he has a claim,” said Artful; “what do you think I ought to give him?”

Alfred thought that a thousand francs lodged to his credit with the Genevese bankers, Gex & Co., would be satisfactory, for though the old soldier was not the man to refuse money, however tendered, it would probably be more acceptable if paid in this way than placed in his hand or sent through the post.

“It shall be done,” said the lawyer. “I will

give you the money and you can pay it to his credit when you go back to Geneva. Is there anybody else ? ”

Balmaine then spoke about Warton, and urged his claim to a substantial recompense, as it was to him more than to anybody else the solution of the mystery was due.

“ I am afraid, though, we can do nothing for Mr. Warton at present, Mr. Balmaine,” said the lawyer thoughtfully. “ Martino has performed a specific service, so has Colonel Bevis, so have you, but Mr. Warton has performed none which we can recognise. I do not think payment for a suggestion made to somebody else would be passed by the Court.”

“ It was a very valuable suggestion, though.”

“ That may be. But you must remember that the trustees are not dealing with their own money, and that all their payments are likely to be strictly scrutinised. When Miss Hardy comes of age, she can, of course, do as she pleases.”

“ And I have already said,” put in Vera, “ that whatever M. Balmaine thinks Mr. Warton ought to have, that will I give him.”

“ I am sure Miss Hardy will be only too generous,” returned Alfred. “ But she will have no power for three years, and a present payment would not alone please Warton ; it would be a great help to him, for he has a large family, and a very modest income. However, if it cannot be

done it must remain undone. He must just wait."

"And now about yourself, Mr. Balmaine," said Artful; "whatever Mr. Warton may have suggested, you have acted. It is to your energy, and yours alone, that Miss Vera will be indebted for the recovery of her fortune. You have spent both time and money on the investigation, and I shall feel myself quite justified in giving you—say a hundred pounds and all your expenses out of pocket."

"Thank you very much," replied Alfred, reddening, "but I want nothing and can take nothing. You paid my expenses to Italy; you are paying my expenses here. That is quite enough."

Vera made no remark, but he fancied that she looked pleased.

"As you like," answered the lawyer stiffly. "But money is one of those things a man should never refuse. When you reach my age you will know the value of it."

"Would it make any difference," asked Balmaine, "if instead of giving me this money, which you think I have deserved, you gave it to Warton?"

"Do you really mean it?"

"Certainly."

"It shall be done, then. I will give you a cheque for a hundred pounds which you can yourself send to Mr. Warton. And I think I may be able to serve your friend in another way. I will offer him

a place in our office. He seems to be a sharp fellow, and I dare say we can afford to pay him a higher salary than he is now receiving. These country offices are not generally too liberal with their clerks. If you will let me have his private address I will write to him."

"He will be delighted, I am sure," exclaimed Alfred eagerly, "and though you may find him a little rough in manner, he is very shrewd and knows his business."

"Just the man I want," said Artful; "and if there should be a fight, a recruit from the enemy's camp may be useful."

Balmaine asked him about the Hardy Fortune Company.

"They have not done much yet," answered the lawyer. "It is rumoured that Mr. Ferret is not quite satisfied with the evidence he has got, and is looking for more. It appears that the man who says he identified Mr. Hardy as John Hardy, of Calder, has not seen him for forty or fifty years, and cases of mistaken identity are so common—I have quite a collection of them—that the testimony of a single witness would not count for much. However, now that we have fortunately found the lost heiress, they will have to throw up the sponge, for they have not a ghost of a chance."

Whereupon Mr. Artful opened a big memorandum book and proceeded to make some notes.

"I think I understand all that has passed," remarked Vera in French, "all but the last part of your conversation, which I confess rather puzzles me. What does throwing up the sponge mean?"

Alfred explained.

"It is very painful to think," she said, after a long pause, "that I should be the cause of all this strife and difficulty. See how much trouble I am giving poor Mr. Artful."

"You need not let that concern you," replied Balmaine, smiling, "lawyers like strife and trouble."

"Do they?" said Vera, with a look of innocent surprise. "Why?"

"Because they make money by it. They live by other people's quarrel and mistakes."

"Always money. Everybody seems to hunger for money. Where is the charm of it?"

"You will perhaps find out, if you live a few years longer, Miss Hardy. You are just now in a false position, for though you have no control over your fortune, you are reputed to be rich. You have all the evils of wealth and none of its compensations."

"There are compensations, then?"

"Very many, I should say."

"You really think, then, that I may esteem myself fortunate in being an heiress? You are glad I am rich?" she said, regarding him keenly.

This was an awkward question. He could not honestly say that he was glad.

"I do think you may esteem yourself fortunate," he answered evasively, "for wealth is a power, and, rightly used, a power for good."

"Who knows that I shall use it rightly? And you only answer one part of my question. But never mind that now. For whom are you in mourning?"

"My mother."

"Your mother! Oh, I am so sorry!" and her look and her voice expressed even more sympathy than her words. And then she questioned him further, and learnt more about him and his affairs than she had ever known before. Cora seemed to interest her greatly.

"You must give me her address," she said, "and when I go to London I will see her."

This request was at once complied with. It had been arranged that Vera should return with Mr. Artful to London, where she was to be the guest of Sir James Leyton, one of her grandfather's executors, a city magnate upon whom had lately been conferred the honour of knighthood. When she expressed a wish that Gabrielle should accompany her Mr. Artful demurred.

"The woman acted very dishonestly," he said, "and I do not think you should have anything more to do with her."

"I promised to take Gabrielle," answered Vera simply, "and I want to take her; it would be dreadful to be all alone in that great city. She has done wrong, it is true—who is there that has not done wrong? but she is not bad, and unless Gabrielle goes, Mr. Artful, I do not go."

The lawyer, of course, yielded. As he afterwards remarked to Balmaine, there was nothing else for it.

"I was never so much surprised in my life," he said; "most girls of her age have no more character than a mollusc; but Miss Hardy has enough for two men. I hope she will get on well with Lady Leyton."

Another desire of Vera's was to make a pilgrimage to her father's grave at Locarno, a proposal to which Mr. Artful all the more readily acceded, as it occurred to him that it might be well, with a view to future eventualities, to obtain official proof of Philip Hardy's death and his burial under his own name. So it was arranged that they should travel thither over the Simplon, and go direct to London by the Mont Cenis and Paris. Martino would bear them company as far as the shores of Lago Maggiore.

Balmaine and all the Senarclens went with the travellers to the railway station. Vera was pale, silent and melancholy, and she kept back her tears with evident effort. Poor girl! she was leaving the mountain land where she had spent so many happy

years, and tried friends whom she dearly loved, for a far country and a position that, how brilliant soever it might seem, was yet full of difficulty and peril.

“When shall I see her again?” was Balmaine’s thought as he walked slowly and sadly towards the beautiful lake of which she had just taken her last look, for though as resolute as before in his policy of renunciation, he felt that Vera had become dearer to him than ever.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE LEYTONS.

SIR JAMES LEYTON was a rich stock-broker, with a fine house at the West End. But he preferred comfort to ostentation, and did not keep up so much style as men who were far worse off. Although he liked now and then to have a few celebrities to dinner, the society he most affected was that of people of his own class. He had two sons, the elder of whom was married and his partner. Sidney, the younger, who had graduated at Cambridge and spent a year in Germany studying political economy, was now making the tour of the world, preparatory to becoming a student at the Middle Temple and entering public life, for Sir James believed that his second son was a genius, and had in him the making of a statesman. The knight was nearly seventy, but hale and well preserved, and his long white hair, ruddy countenance, and rather jaunty carriage made him one of the most conspicuous figures in the neighbourhood of Capel Court. The dame was ten years younger than her lord, and looked no older than her age. Her hair was only just beginning to

turn grey ; her complexion was high ; she was stout without being corpulent ; of good presence ; and her general appearance bespoke a well-fed body and a contented if not an indolent mind.

Lady Leyton gave Vera a warm welcome, in part, perhaps, because she was so agreeably surprised. She knew that the girl had been brought up in a peasant family, and her idea of a *paysanne* was a broad-set young woman with big red hands and wooden shoes, sheepish in look and rough in manner. But here was a veritable young lady, with a refined and winsome face, becomingly if plainly attired, and whatever else she might be, anything but rough in manner.

“ I am very glad to see you, my dear,” she said, kissing her. “ You must be very tired, I am sure. You had better go up-stairs and take off your things. Come, I will show you to your room myself. The odd man will take up your boxes. I am glad you have brought your maid. It will be a comfort to have somebody you can talk to in your own language, won’t it ? Mr. Artful, you will stay and take dinner with us, of course. Sir James will be home in an hour, and you can tell him all your news, you know.”

But the lawyer begged to be excused. He must go home and report himself to Mrs. Artful. He would see Sir James at his office in the City to-morrow.

Vera was shown into a bedroom the like of which she had never seen before, or even imagined, and the entire house seemed to her a very temple of luxury. For the Leyton establishment, albeit not on an extravagant scale, was exceedingly well mounted. Nothing in the way of comfort was wanting that money could provide, and the servants were trained to perfection. But the extreme deference with which they treated her and their mistress annoyed Vera. It ran counter to all her ideas of equality and human dignity that her fellow-creatures should address her with bated breath and downcast eyes, as if she were a superior or even supernatural being.

She had often heard M. Senarclens speak of *bourgeois* families who lived luxurious lives, and whose chief concern was their own personal comfort, and this seemed to be a typical family of the class. At dinner, although there was only Sir James, Lady Leyton and herself, they were waited on by two men-servants.

“Why could not these men be doing something useful,” thought Vera, “cutting down trees in the forest, or working in the fields? A girl could very well change our plates and hand round the *legumes*. And what a degradation? If I were a man I would rather break stones than earn my bread by standing behind another man’s chair and helping him to eat.”

The current of her thoughts was turned by Sir

James, who had received her with great kindness, speaking of her father and grandfather.

"A shrewd old gentleman was your grandfather, Miss Hardy," he said; "none shrewder in the City of London. Quite the architect of his own fortune; made it all himself, just as I have done. Your father was very different, though. He and I were always good friends, but I do not think he could ever have made a fortune."

"He did better than make a fortune," replied the girl. "He devoted himself to a great cause."

"A great cause?"

"Yes, the redemption of Italy."

"Ah! I understand. Yes, very true. But if your grandfather had not made a fortune his son could not have gone abroad. He would have had to stay at home and work. So you see that your grandfather's fortune helped to redeem Italy. Even a great cause has need of money. Very little can be done without money in this world, Miss Hardy."

This was a consideration which had not occurred to Vera before, and it suggested a new use for her fortune. She might devote a part of it to the redemption of oppressed nationalities. Rome, for instance, was still under the dominion of France, and when the revolution foretold by M. Senarclens came to pass——

"However," went on Sir James, after being helped to some more claret, "you will not be with-

out money, thanks to your grandfather. The estate has greatly increased since your grandfather's death. I have seen to the investments myself—they are all in the soundest stocks. None of your doubtful foreign loans or bogus trading companies for me. All Indian Consols and British railway preference stock. Yes, Miss Hardy, you will be very rich. Your income will be more than a hundred thousand a year. What will you do with it?"

"Make as many people happy as I can," answered Vera, who had the vaguest possible idea as to the "purchasing power" of the sum in question.

"That means you will give it away, I suppose," said Sir James drily. "I do not think you will, though. You will think very differently three years hence; and political economists say that there is nothing more demoralising than promiscuous giving."

Vera made no answer. She did not understand political economy, and it was evident that Sir James Leyton did not understand her. Shortly after dinner Lady Leyton, observing that her young guest looked tired, and remembering that she had been travelling all day and all night, suggested that she had, perhaps, better go to bed; and on this hint Vera, who could hardly keep her eyes open, was only too glad to act.

"She is not at all what I expected," said Lady Leyton.

“Why, what did you expect?”

“I feared she might be coarse and uncultured. But she is really quite clever, and when she has learnt to use her knife and fork properly, and one or two things of that sort, will be quite presentable. She not only knows French quite well, which in the circumstances is not to be wondered at, but I think also German and Italian.”

“She seems to have rather wild ideas, though.”

“I do not know much about her ideas, but she has a very scanty wardrobe. I must take her to-morrow to Madame Florissant, and order her some new gowns. I was thinking——”

“Yes,” said Sir James, seeing that his wife hesitated. “You were thinking——”

“That it would be nice if Sydney——”

“Could help Miss Vera to take care of her fortune. You are quite right. She will require somebody to take care of it; why not Sydney?”

“He cannot be long now.”

“He may be here any day. But I don’t think I should say anything to her, if I were you.”

“Oh dear, no. But I will watch. And I should not be surprised if Sydney were to fall in love with her at once, and she with him. He is young, and the girl is graceful and good-looking. All we have to do is to keep possible rivals as much as possible at a distance.”

The next day the ladies went to Madame Florissant's.

"You will be able to speak to her in her own language," said Lady Leyton.

So there was held a polyglot conversation, Madame Florissant and Vera speaking in French, Lady Leyton English. The dressmaker wanted to attire Miss Hardy in the height of fashion, which was just then anything but æsthetic. Vera demurred.

"But you will look so odd if you are not dressed like other people," urged Lady Leyton.

"I would rather look odd than hideous," was the reply, "but I do not think I shall look so very singular. Could you not do something like this, Madame Florissant?" and taking a pencil and a piece of paper, she outlined, in a few rapid strokes, a costume which, though not a wide departure from the prevailing mode, avoided its worst features, and was pretty and becoming.

"It is not bad," said the dressmaker, "not at all, but it is not what people are wearing. Still, if you like, I will make your costumes *comme ça*."

"I do like," answered Vera, rather peremptorily; and though some further objection was offered, she got her way.

"It is quite true," thought Lady Leyton; "she is a strange girl, and has some wild ideas, very wild. She will have to be managed."

"Where are the poor?" asked Vera, as they drove homeward. She had read somewhere a vivid description of the extremes of poverty and wealth to be found in London, and rather expected to see the streets crowded with beggars.

"There are not many poor in this neighbourhood," said Lady Leyton; "they live more in the East, and about Fulham and there. A great deal is being done for them just now. My husband subscribes to several City charities; and when Mr. Softly—that is our clergyman—mentions any deserving case, I always give him something."

"Are they very poor—those people at Fulham and the East? Do you ever go amongst them?"

"No, my dear, I leave that to the leisured and the young. I have neither the strength nor the time."

Later in the day they drove in the Park, and Vera was astonished beyond measure at the numbers of splendid equipages, fine horses, and well-dressed people she saw, and wondered more than ever what the poor of London were like in that mysterious East which she had not yet seen.









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